Queen Of Liars:
Celestia

Queen of Liars

A Celestia Ludenberg Zine

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A Sweet Supplication

Written by mahimahimeghan

Novoselic. A small European island no more than twenty miles south of France. One would expect a country with so little worldly presence to prove no merit beyond being an answer at a bar trivia night.

That could not be further from the truth.

Novoselic was fine and prosperous. Their exports were renowned. Visitors said that the weather is always fair, that they wish they could live there forever. And the princess. By god, the princess.

A five-foot-seven stature. Smooth, fair skin. Blue-gray eyes like rocks that shine beneath the waters at high tide. And blonde hair, so long and shiny that some have said you can see your reflection if you stare at it long enough.

Many saw her and wondered just where all the money to keep her so pristine comes from. The answer was simple, really.

Stealing.

Sonia Nevermind lived a double life. When not parading about as Novoselic's princess, she was pillaging neighboring countries. Ancient relics, the most pristine of memorabilia, even traditional ceremonial attire.

You name it, Sonia had stolen it.

It seems unrealistic, surely. How could anyone not mistake that beautiful blonde hair?

There's nothing to mistake when there's a bullet in your head. It's a drastic measure, yes, and Sonia doesn't enjoy it, but "a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do." Or so she was told.

Currently, Sonia resides in her private chambers. A knock at the door and various letters flitter in through the mailbox. Most are unimportant junk, but Sonia stops upon seeing a cream envelope sealed in red wax.

The envelope alone is enough to make her curious. She tears through the letter (inelegantly, for she was never too great at letter-opening), finding a red card with golden script.

"You have been invited to the Ludenberg Manor for a feast the evening of the 21st," she reads, scrutinizing the card.

Why, that was tonight! What luck she should receive this invitation so late…

"Do wear your best attire. Dinner will be served."

On the bottom is none other than Celestia's signature.

Celestia Ludenberg, huh? She was occasionally a point of discussion among her fellow bounty-hunting peers. But discussion usually fell flat, for all that was known is that those who go to her manor were never seen again. Ever.

Even so, the thought of being invited to such a place excites Sonia. It would be a perfect opportunity to steal. Celestia Ludenberg was known for her refined tastes, so there certainly had to be something small enough she could get her hands on without Celestia knowing.

Her missions have gone a bit stale as of late. All these escapades were far too easy to escape. Her life needed some thrill.

"Very well, Celestia. I think I will go."

Sonia places the card on her bureau, turning to her closet and opening it with a flourish.

Celestia insisted she come in her best attire, after all.

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Calling Celestia's residence a "manor" would be a grave understatement.

Celestia's home was a castle straight out of a fairytale, with tall, gray towers that pierced the sky. The sheer quantity of spires was enough to make Sonia's head spin. Not even the castles in her homeland were this complex.

Although it definitely had a fairytale-esc feel to its design, Sonia couldn't help but think that this castle belonged to a villain, not a hero. It was nighttime, after all, so the building basked in shadow, too tall and wide to be lit by moonlight alone. All that was missing was a well-timed clap of thunder.

For a second, Sonia waits.

The thunder never comes.

Dissatisfied, Sonia walks to the castle doors, clicking a doorbell to the side. The sound of a bell boomed throughout the building, giving Sonia just enough time to stand back and compose herself.

"Do come in."

An intercom, huh? That must be Celestia's voice. She spoke in English. Not that French would have been an issue for Sonia, but she appreciates the gesture nonetheless.

The doors seem to creak open on their own, giving way to a grand foyer. A black chandelier rests at the ceiling, glowing golden.

The first thing Sonia notices, beyond the luxury of the furniture, is just how dim the place is. All of the lights had the same warm glow as the chandelier above her head. Perhaps Celestia had a light sensitivity?

"My master eagerly awaits you in the dining hall."

Oh, a servant! Sonia hadn't noticed him when she walked in. Perhaps he made an entrance when she was looking at the chandelier? But if that was the case, surely she would have heard him, no?

Whatever. It wasn't like she was here for him anyway.

She follows the servant down the hall, heels clicking against the floor. The servant is well-mannered, but his matter of appearance only adds to the almost malicious atmosphere of the manor, for his skin is deathly pale, his eyes an almost glowing red, and his hair a cropped cut of black.

"Do make yourself comfortable," the servant says, ushering her inside.

This most certainly was a dining hall. Sonia can't help but be amused by the tablecloth, for it was so ornate to be put on a table meant for dining of all things. What if someone were to spill something? She didn't think a stain would easily come out of the laced and bejeweled fringe. Was it a hand-wash only article? Why, the table was so long! Whoever is responsible for this tablecloth must be truly devoted to their cause.

At the end of the table, some twenty feet away, rests the woman of the hour. Celestia Ludenberg.

"Miss Nevermind."

"Sonia is fine."

"Sonia," Celestia says, correcting herself. "I welcome you to the Ludenberg manor."

"It's a pleasure, Miss Ludenberg," Sonia says, lowering herself into a bow. Her gesture seems to meet Celestia's approval, for she smiles and giggles to herself.

"Now now, if I am to be calling you Sonia, it is only fair that you call me Celeste, is it not? Sit."

"I suppose so…" Sonia mutters, tucking the skirt of her black dress beneath her as she sits.

From the other end of the table, Celestia leans over, putting an elbow to the tablecloth, craning her chin so it rests in her hand. For most, this would be a gesture done absentmindedly, but for someone like Sonia who knows proper table manners, this comes off as beyond rude. She figures it must be intentional, for the castle has been prim and proper, and up until now, nothing has been out of place. In a way, the gesture feels almost risqué, like Celeste is making a show of letting her guard down, in order to entice Sonia into being more intimate with her. But Sonia will not falter. She is here for business, not for whatever feast Celeste had invited her for.

"Are you hungry, Sonia? I would have left the food I had prepared out for you, but I didn't want it to go cold."

"I am fine. I ate before my arrival."

"Is that so…?" Celeste asks, recoiling from her previous position into a proper seated one. She dares not show it, but she's frankly a bit offended. Was Sonia truly going to defy her?

"Yes. I don't wish to take something that I cannot repay in full."

"Repay in full?" Celeste pries, a hand now to her mouth, shock gracing her features. "Why, this meeting is a gift! There is no need to repay me. Preparing such bountiful meals is an everyday occurrence for my servants."

Laying it on thick, hm? Sonia supposes it's to be expected. "I thank you for your generosity, but my previous point still stands."

"Oh, but I implore you," Celeste pleads, her voice dripping with ichor. "Servants?"

All at once, ten servants make their way into the room, each carrying silver dishes concealed with matching tops. The servants appear to be copy and pasted, each nearly identical in height, all sporting the same short hair, pale skin, and red eyes.

Sonia cannot begin to describe all the food in front of her. Roasted chicken, turkey, salads, and breads. Citruses like lemon and lime. Grapes. Pork, ham, and multiple charcuterie boards. There are even desserts, from red velvet cake to Danish pastries, crêpes, éclairs, and even bûche de noël. Celestia had really outdone herself.

It would be improbable for all of the food to be poisoned, but knowing Celeste's track record, Sonia doesn't dare take that chance, no matter how appetizing it all looks. Celeste studies her as her eyes go from one dish to the next, pondering just how each was prepared.

Sonia makes no move to serve herself.

"You'll have something to drink, at the very least?"

At her word, some of the servants disappear into what Celestia can only presume to be the kitchen, re-emerging with new trays with drinks of every color.

Drinks were easy to poison.

"If you're feeling under the weather, I'd suggest this grape juice," Celestia says, taking a wine glass filled with blood-red liquid from one of the servants.

Grape juice. Because that was totally just grape juice.

"I have my own water."

"Very well."

Sonia watches Celeste eat. She does so with elegance, taking the tiniest of bites, careful not to smudge her black lipstick. When she drinks her grape juice, she holds her pinky out, the same way one would when handling a tea set.

It's silent, save for the clinking of china. Words aren't spoken, yet Sonia can clearly hear them inside her head: the way Celeste eyes her, begging her to take just a sip, as they slowly scan the table from left to right, properly adoring each dish, hoping to meet Sonia's gaze at one that convinces her to indulge, to let go, to sink her teeth into something and let her guard down just long enough for Celeste to string her up in her own private puppet show. She would be a fine piece to add to the spiderweb that she has cultivated at this mansion, a golden jewel, a Mary, holy and virgin.

Sonia does not let go, however. She neither eats, nor drinks.

Celeste cannot help but be partially disappointed. Even still, Sonia's smarts make her even more desirable. It's not like she doesn't have an excuse for this failed outcome, either—it was just a test of character, she'll say. Nothing more.

"Hm," Celestia quips, rising from her chair, "I believe that will be enough for me for the evening. How do you feel, Sonia?"

For someone who was so insistent that she eat before, Sonia is surprised that Celeste hasn't made another comment on it.

"I am fine."

"Excellent."

Celeste rings a small, dainty handbell—the type that looks like it would break if you were to look at it the wrong way. Wordlessly, the servants return, cleaning the table without so much as a single instruction.

"If you would please follow me…"

Sonia knows the instruction is for her. Like the servants, she, too, is wordless, following Celeste as she leads her through the winding corridors.

Celeste leads her guest to a wide, open room. Unlike the other rooms in the mansion, coated with muted grays and burgundies, this room shines gold, the light reflective against shined hardwood floors. The leftmost wall is paned with mirrors, with the wall furthest from the entrance adorned with what appears to be some sort of handlebar.

Some sort of recital room? Sonia wonders, hand in chin. Celeste didn't seem like the type to call the likes of wandering stage performers into her home. Any big-budget production would have black floors, for unlike the wood here, black absorbs light, nullifying the streaky glares found in this room.

"I welcome you to my private rehearsal room, Sonia."

That made more sense. If this room was only for Celeste herself, it would explain why she chose aesthetics over more typical theatrical conventions.

After closing the door behind her, Celeste makes her way to a piano tucked away into the furthest corner of the room. When Sonia expects her to play it, she finds herself surprised, for Celestia instead produces a record player from behind the seat, resting it on the piano's closed lid. There happens to be an outlet on the wall beside the piano, making plugging in the record player easy.

"I do think that one of the best ways to come to know someone is through partnered physical activity," Celeste explains, setting the record currently in the device to its starting position. "Would you partake in a dance with me?"

"Certainly," Sonia says flatly.

"I knew you would agree."

A gentle instrumental begins to fill the room. Once Celeste has settled on a volume, she makes her way to the room's center, offering Sonia her left hand. Sonia follows her, accepting her hand in right.

The huntress is met with a grin that can only be described as mischievous. It's gone as soon as Sonia registers it, replaced with a pristine smile. Celeste raises their linked hands, putting her free one on Celestia's hip, silently motioning for Sonia to do the same. She does so, looking for Celeste to lead her in whatever dance it is she plans to do.

"Let us not tire ourselves out. I will lead you as best I can, but you will find yourself having an easier time should you give yourself to the music."

"I understand."

At the next measure of music, Celeste begins their waltz. Sonia is able to keep up without a hitch which seems to impress Celeste, who decides to put her experience to use by guiding her through a series of twirls. Though the music remains fairly stagnant, the dance turns from casual and relaxed to practiced and poised. Nothing sweat-worthy, and certainly nothing enough to take either party's breath away, but as the song drones on, Sonia watches as Celeste's reservations fade one by one in real time.

"Tell me," Celeste asks, looming over Sonia as she angles her downwards for a dip, "who taught you to dance this well?"

"I have only the finest instructor back at the kingdom."

"How interesting. You were clearly taught well."

"I thank you for your praise."

Celeste pulls Sonia back up, the arm that takes her bending out, fingers still interlaced with Sonia's. An amateur might be sent flying from the sudden action, tumbling into their partner, but Sonia is able to stop her momentum before their chests touch.

"May I ask a few questions about you?"

"You may. I warn you that there are some questions I may have to refuse, however."

Faces less than a foot apart, Sonia keeps in time with Celeste's sidesteps, looking at her with a gaze so strong she might as well be peering through her.

"So, are your servants really vampires?"

That's no way to start your questioning, Celeste thinks, her eye twitching ever–so–slightly. She would have thought that someone as elegant as Sonia would have a series of simpler questions leading up to this one, so that she could weave an interesting story through a series of half–truths.

She supposes that she should come to expect the unexpected when it comes to Sonia Nevermind.

"No," she answers, deciding to tell the truth, "but they are fully convinced that they are. They truly believe that they will live forever to serve my very whim."

"I see. And would I be correct in assuming that there are no magic potions at the heart of this ordeal?"

"Such things do not exist. A voice as sweet as mine is the closest humanity has come to magic."

"So it is a willing act," Sonia replies, raising her voice ever so slightly as she is spun out from Celeste's embrace. "I was wondering where the fangs were."

"The curious know better than to ask."

"I am only hoping you knew better than to attempt to recruit me into this ludicrous charade."

"Perhaps I did, perhaps I did not," Celeste says dismissively, the song finally beginning to fade out. "Regardless, you've proven yourself more competent than I initially presumed. Bravo, Sonia Nevermind."

Finished with the dance, Celeste steps out of their shared embrace to turn off the record player.

"Now that I've shared my reasons for planning this visit, why don't you reveal what's hiding under that petticoat of yours?

"I beg your pardon?"

"You're wearing a garter on your left leg," Celeste observes, lips pursed in a smile. "I noticed you were left–handed at dinner earlier and confirmed my suspicions while we danced. If you were concealing a weapon, it would make sense to have it on the same leg as your dominant hand, would it not?"

Fuck, Sonia thinks, *she's good*. This whole time Sonia had convinced herself she had the upper hand, yet Celeste had seen right through her.

"A pistol," she answers, cut and dry, making no attempt to follow up with an explanation.

"Did you intend to kill me?"

"Only in an extreme circumstance."

"Looks like we both are liars at heart," Celestia replies with a bemused chuckle. "But it is getting rather late. As you may have guessed, I am not nocturnal. Perhaps I can give you a gift to sway you out of using that toy of yours?"

"That sounds reasonable."

"Very well. I shall lead the way."

Sonia becomes entranced by the sound of two sets of heels against mahogany hardwoods as she is once again led through the mansion's maze–like halls. She decides not to make any funny moves, for who knows what Celeste would be able to pull against her with the truths she now knows.

"I like this," Sonia says, pointing.

Celeste turns on her heel, looking to the framed painting Sonia is looking at. It's a picture of a cat, sleek and golden, adorned with a little cat–sized cravat.

"Ah, my father's cat. I never was quite fond of him."

Sonia can't tell if she's talking about the cat or her father. She decides she isn't curious enough to bother asking which.

"Take it. My own cat is far better than that scratching little scamp. Go sell it at a flea market or something, will you?"

"It'll go for a high price if it's found in my hands."

"So long as it isn't in mine."

Using her height advantage, Sonia unmounts the painting from the wall, standing on her tiptoes. She gently secures it under her armpit. It seems to weigh nothing to her, for she carries it as if it were simply a book.

"The entrance is right this way."

Sonia soon finds herself in the foyer once again. Two servants stand at the staircase, hands folded behind their back. Sonia can only wonder how long they've been stationed there.

"Your presence made for quite the amusing night, Sonia Nevermind," Celeste decrees, taking care to sound her best in front of her servants. "Should I invite you over again, would you take me up on the offer?"

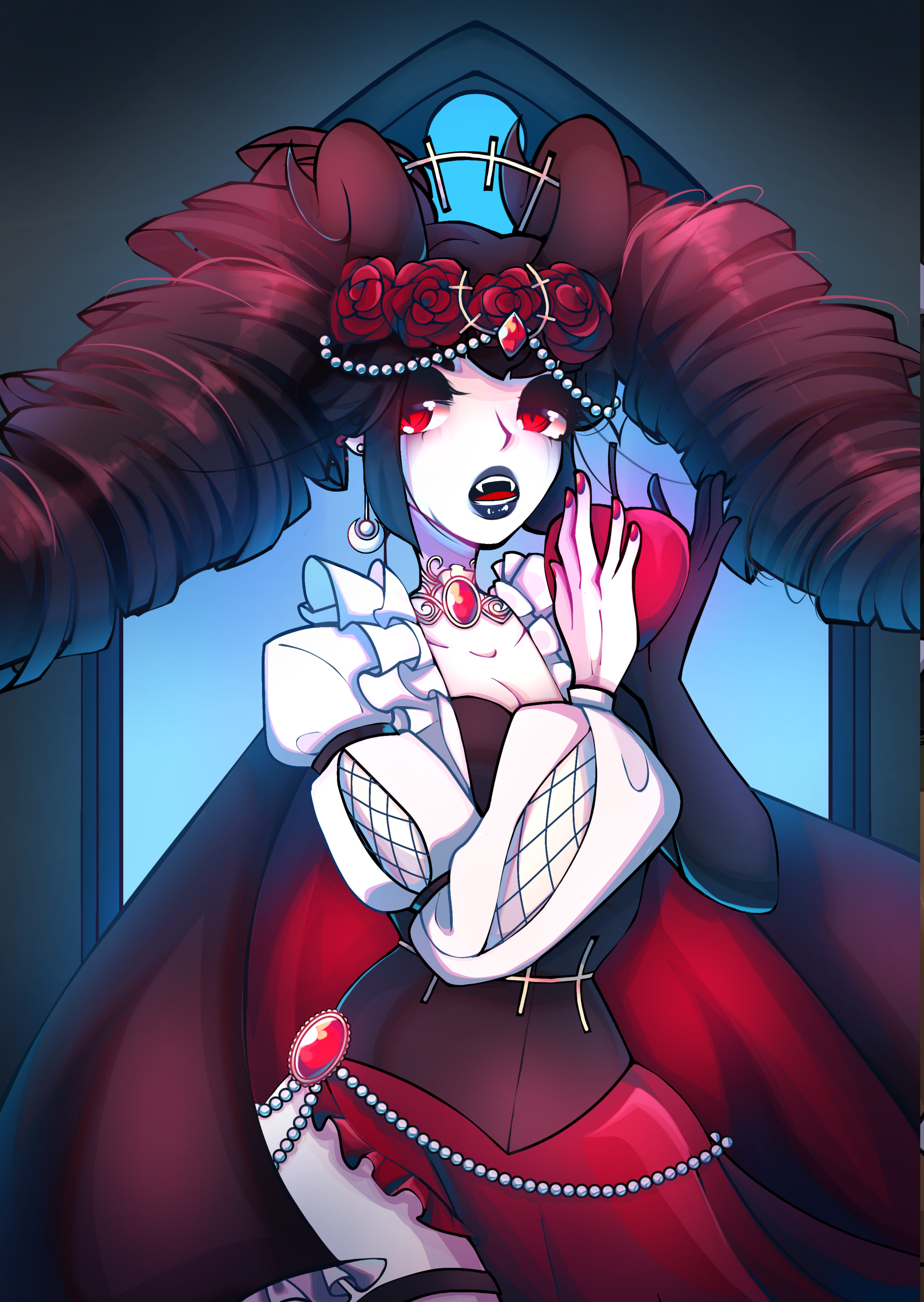
"Of course. Though I won't be so careless with my equipment."

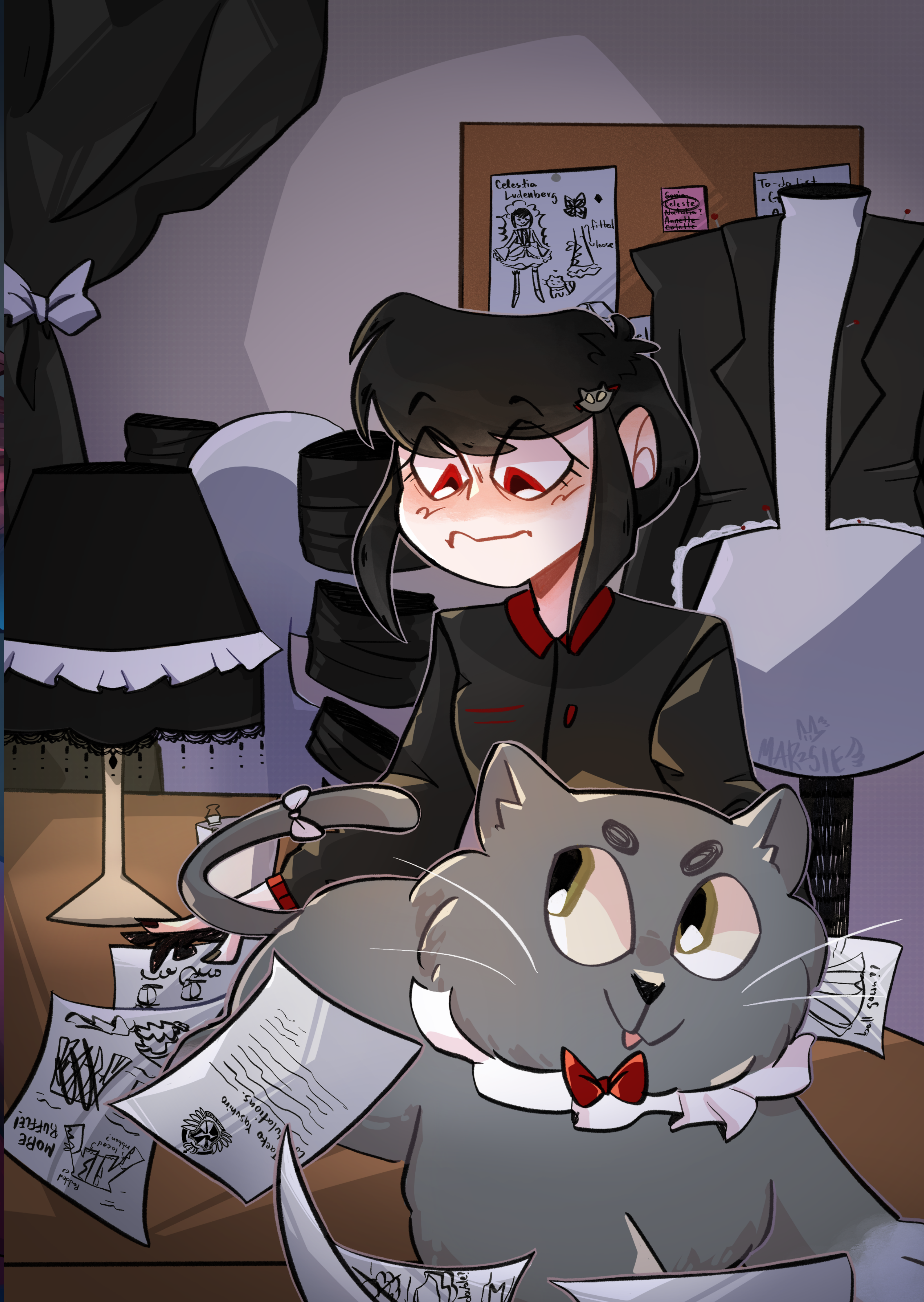
One servant turns his head to another in confusion. A stare from Celeste is enough to snap him back into place.

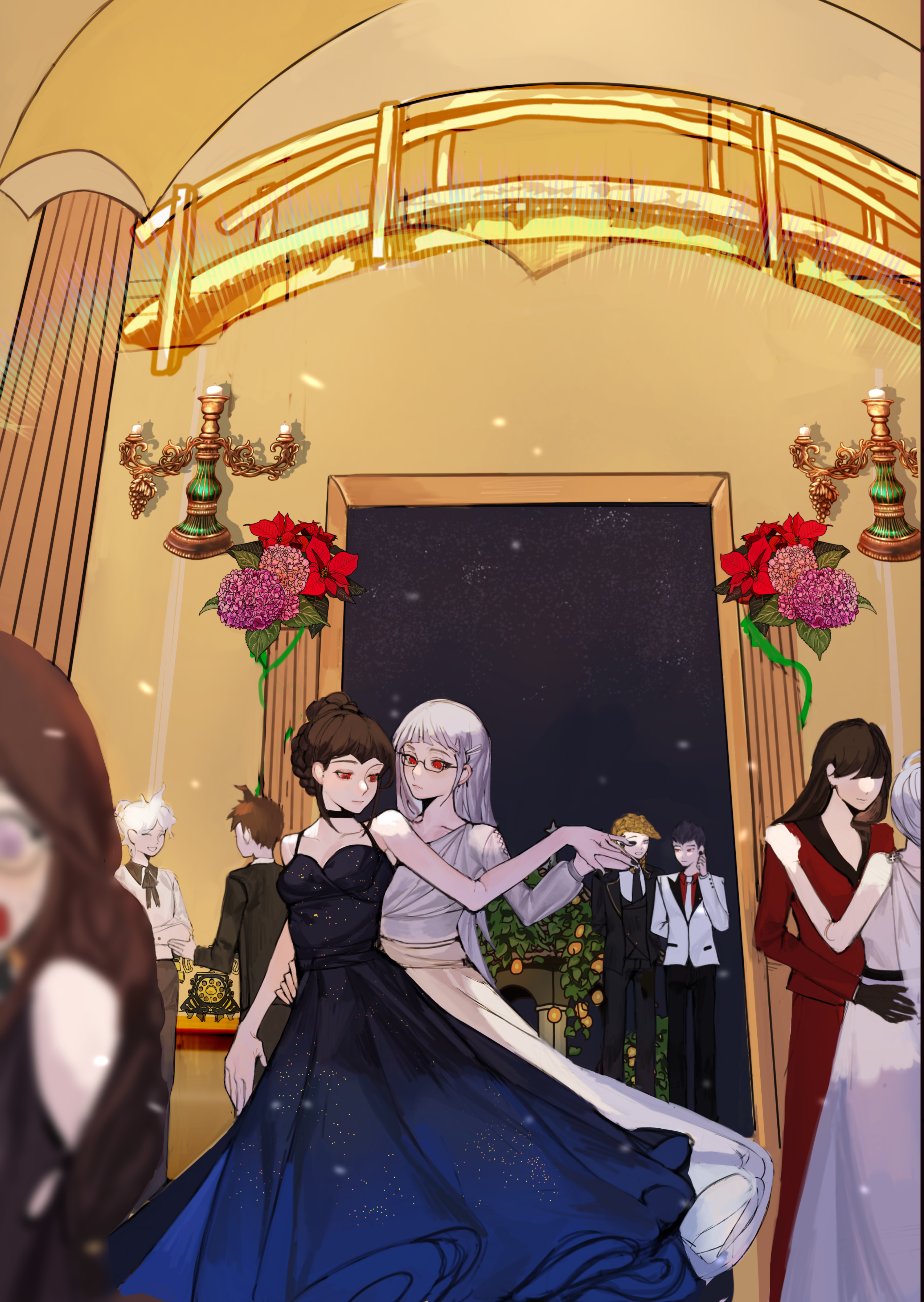
"Very well. Good night, Sonia Nevermind."

"And good night to you too, Celestia Ludenberg."

Celestia waves her hand as Sonia turns, watching the huntress vanish into the night.




Celestia Ludenberg
fitted
loose
~~Sonia~~
Celeste
~~Natalia~~?
~~Annette~~
~~Colette~~
To-do list
MORE RUFFLE!
laced ribbon?
Padded
Taeko Yasuhiro
ulations.
ball gown??
MS MARZSIE



Taeko's Little Ballroom Romp

Written by Starry | Illustrated by Ara

“...And *don't* forget to stay in sight! This venue is massive, Taeko. If I can't see you, I *will* find a PA and embarrass you in front of everyone. You know I have no shame.”

Taeko clucked her tongue. Her older brother was getting all protective again. She would be lying if she said it bothered her, but she found it amusing that Kiyotaka thought he had any hopes of regulating her tonight. Tonight, while she spun about in a midnight dress speckled with star-like gems across its bodice, her hair done up in a massive intricate braid that partially framed her face.

Kiyotaka peered at her, his heavy brows pinching. “Are you wearing makeup?”

“Kiyotaka, really. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“Well—No. It's just, you haven't, lately—”

Taeko fisted a section of her skirt and twirled in place. “It is my armor tonight. Do not think I have forgotten about our suspect.” Kiyotaka's shoulders visibly relaxed into his boring white suit. “Are there any clues the Chief Prosecutor let you in on, or have they simply smuggled us into the future crime scene?”

“Keep your voice down,” Kiyotaka hissed.

Their footsteps tinked delicately across the marbled hallway. Ahead, the line was chock-full of people in hooped skirts and flashy coattails.

Her attorney brother carefully observed these passersby, his crimson gaze hooded. “Let's wait until Mondo returns.” Mondo was busy scouting the premises, but Taeko was certain he had already gotten lost. The venue was practically a castle in scale, with multiple entrances cordoned off for the guests. All these hallways led into the same wide pavilion, a courtyard at the heart of the palace.

How the Chief Prosecutor had managed to stuff her embarrassing older brother into such a riveting venture, Taeko had no idea.

They were inching toward the front of the line, their last chance of escape before the finery closed in on them definitively. Kiyotaka kept glancing around, the sweat beading at his temple. Where in the world had their idiot companion gone? Another guest was let in, and then another, and then a whole posse of feather-adorned individuals, and then they were close to the front—

And then, trailing from the line's other end, an array of haphazard apologies echoed in. "'Scuze me, comin' through;" then, "Someone held my spot for me up ahead," like they were still in grade school: and, "Oh, I did not mean to step on your foot, fella, um, I'm just gonna keep going now."

Taeko winced. "I found him," she said.

Kiyotaka's eyes rose heavenward, but Taeko saw him holding back a smile. Disgusting.

At least Mondo dazzled tonight. He'd let Taeko take him shopping for the venue and had been fitted for a black tux with gold piping and a nearly see-through lace back. He'd combed and braided his long dirty blonde hair, and Kiyotaka was caught between staring at his shoes and at his boyfriend. Taeko snorted.

Upon his return, Mondo pecked his boyfriend's cheek and scooted into line beside them. Kiyotaka blushed. Mondo cleared his throat, looked away. "Alrighty. Looks like they're gonna try and keep us corralled in the courtyard, but one of my buddies is working the guard duties, so he'll hit us up if he learns any cool facts."

"Accessory," Taeko asked, "what warrants a fact as *cool* when your brain is tiny?"

Mondo swatted at her. Taeko ducked and stumbled into the lady in front of them, who shot them a rude look. Whoops.

Kiyotaka squinted at Taeko. They were soon ushered to the courtyard, and he grabbed her arm before she could dissolve into the crowd.

"Everyone listen to me." He glared at his sister, carefully lowered his voice. "Recall that the timing suggests a *serial killer* is attending this dance. You have to be careful. Do you understand? You *have* to be *careful*." He was practically boring holes into Taeko's face with his eyes. "Taeko, I only let you come because I knew you'd be upset if I didn't. So *follow* my instructions. As much as we want to gather evidence, I'd rather we all escape with our lives."

Taeko lowered her head. Kiyotaka didn't relax his grip on her until she nodded. They all knew Mondo was just going to cling to his boyfriend anyways, so it wasn't like he needed to be told.

"What do we know?" Taeko asked. She was looking askance, watching the pretty ladies swirl by her. Someone was playing harp music at a soothing, slow melody.

"Our sources indicate that they are present tonight. We also have"—Kiyotaka turned to Mondo, who nodded—"a way out, if necessary. We don't know much about the target except that they must have money." Unfortunately, that last detail ruled out nobody except for Kiyotaka and Mondo themselves.

Taeko bobbed her head. "I'm going to dance now."

"Taeko—" her brother was saying as she turned and tromped off, "you—have fun."

She didn't look back, but her heart shimmered.

The courtyard was lined in intricate white pillars. Small, contained gardens and topiaries hugged its four corners, but in the center spread out a massive roofed ballroom edged by expensive candles and streamers. Finely-dressed individuals had gathered under the marbled space, many joining hands to sway to the somber music. Taeko hung on the fringe, searching her peripheral.

A woman in dark attire caught her eye. She had long shadowy brown hair that shrouded her back, and she wore a crisp mauve pantsuit with black piping and matching midnight gloves. She was standing on the sidelines, as if she planned on not dancing a single step for the entire night. Taeko, grinning to herself, decided to ruin the beautiful stranger's agenda.

She wended her way over and held out a hand. "Hello. May I have this dance?"

The stranger peered at her, pale cheeks cold and devoid of color. "This song still hasn't ended."

"But I would like to have a dance with you right now," Taeko said.

The stranger curled her lip. Dutifully she laid her gloved fingers over Taeko's. "Surprise me," she merely said. Her voice was low, husky. It thrilled Taeko.

Upon dragging her companion into the ballroom, Taeko eyed the surrounding dancers and led her partner in a kind-of waltz she'd learned from some fellow street rats in her gambling days. Her partner had a small, mysterious smile on her lips, but she let Taeko sway her, broken steps and all.

In the stuffy heat of the dance floor, they spoke in soft tones.

"Your name?" Taeko breathed.

"Maki." A beat. "You?"

She hesitated. Swallowed. "Celestia." She wrangled a massive smile across her makeup-adorned face.

"Your hands," Taeko added, squeezing them, "they are cold."

Maki blinked. "So?"

Shoot. How did the line go? "So I will, um—" Taeko lifted them to her heart and held them there. Her pulse began to tremble. They had stopped in the midst of all the dancing, a little island of darkness, and Taeko was trying to control her breathing.

Maki's expression was unreadable. Eventually she took over, leading Taeko through an intricate dance that caused her to stumble a few times. With each misstep, Maki caught her, a hand squeezing her waist, her shoulder. Taeko was lightheaded once the stringed music slowed to a quick pause in between songs. She was searching for Maki's hands only to find her entire partner had melded into the crowd, a shapeless shadow. Maki had deserted her!

Perhaps—Taeko cinched her ludicrous smile—her partner had been a little embarrassed by the displays of affection and tagged out. Too bad. Undeterred, Taeko began to haunt anew after another lonesome woman on the ballroom's demure edges.

She found herself approaching a tall, pale young lady in glasses with braided silvery hair and a matching dress that reached the floor. She stood in place, statuesque, her crimson eyes trained on the ground as if begging nobody to notice her. Too bad for her next target, Taeko was an expert at picking up random women who looked like they didn't want to dance. Yet.

Deftly, Taeko approached the woman and beamed up at her. She towered over Taeko, yet she peeped and blushed at her sudden companion. Taeko extended a hand, asked, "May I?"

The woman blinked. "With me?" She glanced behind herself, searching for an invisible ghost dancer.

Taeko snorted. "*Yes*, silly. You are lovely, so much so that I absolutely must request a moment of your time."

The stranger's blush thickened, a dense rouge fog. "Oh my." Exhaling sharply, her hand fell onto Taeko's. "A warning: I have not practiced since my, ah, *friend* last needed a partner." Her gaze shot away momentarily; Taeko followed it but could not pinpoint the stranger's elusive friend.

Again, Taeko led her partner, secretly pleased to learn she had recruited a woman who was an even shabbier dancer than she. Now Taeko got to catch and spin her partner when she stumbled, moving slowly enough that she could feel every beat of the jittery pulse in her companion's gloved hand.

"Celestia," she offered. "And you?"

Her companion nibbled her silver lips. "Peko."

"Beautiful, elegant Peko," Taeko murmured. Her partner fidgeted, squeezing Taeko's hand tightly.

Taeko swooned. She staged a fall so slow that even anxious Peko caught on with time enough to save her, arms encircling her. Taeko felt her partner's muscular build hidden beneath long sleeves, and then she was grateful anew for Peko's embrace (or she really would have fallen).

They danced until Taeko's feet hurt and Peko was a pink flushed storm, until the music all blurred into one elongated chord. They retired to a bench in the outer gardens and made fun of the other ostentatious party-goers. Taeko pointed out her brother's stupid white suit, and Peko admired his boyfriend's Taeko-approved attire.

They were laughing about a dress bedecked in real live feathers, searching for accompanying baby geese, when Peko stood. "I-I'm so sorry." She held Taeko's gaze. "I must leave." She discreetly pulled up her sleeve, revealing a watch. "I'm already late."

Taeko's heart fell. "Can't you stay?"

How Peko frowned, biting back her disappointment. "I would upset someone dear to me."

"Ah." Taeko considered her brother, and she sighed. "Could you visit me once you return?"

Peko took her hand and led it swiftly to her lips. "It would be my honor."

Taeko watched her gather up her skirts to move as quickly—and unhindered—as possible. She was already plotting how to track Peko's movements (she could never let such a woman go) when an entire man who moved like a drunk crashed onto the other side of the bench.

Taeko's delicate brows raised. "Hello?"

The man sat up. He wore an azure suit with a tie that was not quite on right, but Taeko couldn't figure out how. His hair was squiggly white. Everything about him unnerved her.

Offering her a too-wide smile, he asked, "You're looking for a way out of the courtyard, aren't you?"

"I am?" she posed, hesitant.

"That silver lady was just admitted by a couple guards. She looked like she had somewhere mightily important to go."

Taeko simply *had* to go see where the mightily important place was.

Her ghost-pale companion knew when he had her. He smirked. "There's a back way through the shrubs. I'll show you."

Taeko spared one glance to her brother, still dancing innocuously with Mondo, before following the man through the shrubbery on the outskirts of the courtyard. The sharp plants obscured a small window, which led directly into an outer chamber of the palace. Taeko slipped off her high heels, crawled in, and beamed at the silence she made walking carefully across cold marble corridors. Her companion started up a deeply confusing narrative about some book he was writing concerning teenagers who had to kill each other in order to escape a deadly school and a literal bear headmaster, and hey, Taeko, you look like you would make an amazing murderer, can I put you in my book as one of the killers—

When suddenly, the nonstop jabber at her back disappeared. Taeko jolted and searched, but she could not find her creepy ghost-like stranger anywhere. Perhaps he had dissociated from reality.

Taeko continued on, clutching her high heels like makeshift weapons. She wandered for an ageless night through dark, frigid hallways and fancy guest bedrooms, checking after herself through golden mirrors and frosted windows. Kiyotaka was probably worried. She nursed her guilt, reaching further into the dark.

Eventually she came across a posh velvet staircase. Ascending, she encountered a ringed balcony that framed the inner courtyard. As she made her way over to it, seeking a glimpse of her brother, she froze at the crunch of fine shoes on marble.

Someone was behind her.

Taeko stood carefully still, her breaths hitched.

The footsteps picked up speed. Then a hand brushed her shoulder. She lurched—Peko caught her, eyes wide. "Why are you here?"

Taeko foisted a grin and shrugged.

"I think there are others," Peko whispered, "people who could hurt you." She glanced carefully around Taeko. "Stay near me."

Taeko tailed her, heart slamming excitedly into her ribcage. Peko let her hold her hand. Her free one was on a sheathed sword. Ah. A sword.

Taeko idly considered the situation she had gotten herself into.

They approached the railing overlooking the courtyard. Taeko only allowed herself short glances to seek out her brother. Couldn't find him. Swallowed her apprehension like a large pill.

A great door loomed at the end of the hallway, decorated in intricate peacocks and fairies. Peko was slowing as they entered its shadow, her hand squeezing Taeko's. "I'm sorry. I-I didn't want you to see this side of me. My master required it of me."

Concerned, Taeko squeezed her hand in return. "I understand," she offered. She'd had her own part to play, long ago.

Peko squared her shoulders, raising her hand with Taeko's to clutch the door's clasp—

BANG BANG BANG BANG—

And Peko thrust them both onto the plush carpet where they rolled two, three times before she rose and smashed her now-unsheathed bamboo sword into their assailant. Taeko looked up—and met a familiar face.

Maki. In her hand was a small gun. Its bullets' holes now protruded from the wooden door's face. The peacocks were ruined. Taeko's heart was pounding ever louder, so loudly she couldn't hear either woman's breaths.

Maki was stumbling back; her gun clicked a faint warning. She met Peko's glare head-on and said, "Give me the target."

The… target.

The weapons. Peko's guilt before even doing anything.

Taeko stared at the door and wondered, breathless, what poor soul behind it was about to meet his maker.

Inhaling a tight breath, she hitched a tentative smile to her face. Above her, Maki and Peko were locked into a standstill, the bamboo sword braced against the arm that squeezed the gun aimed directly at Taeko's head. Oh, how exciting. How the heck was she going to puzzle herself out of this one?

With one clammy hand, Taeko grasped her high heels. Maki watched her clutch them and start to sit up, bending over herself as if about to put them back on. "Stop moving," Maki ordered, firing a bullet into the ground just inches off of Taeko's face. The resulting heat blast stroked her cheek.

Okay. Taeko had one hand on each heel. Although sitting, she was no longer stuck on her back, and she tensed, ready to spring into action at the crack of an opportunity.

Peko broke the silence. "Don't. She's innocent."

Despite the entire predicament, Taeko's heart burned a little brighter.

Maki's gun clicked again. Taeko swallowed a gasp. "So what?" The assassin clucked her tongue. "Her life against my orphans." Maki blew out a breath. "I need that money. I am getting that money. I have a family to protect, and this target should be my last so long as I *take* him. Don't you understand, Celestia?" She was facing Taeko now, her cheeks shadowed with grays and uneasy pinks. She indicated Peko. "You have a better reason?"

Curious, Taeko's gaze shot over to her protector. Peko stiffened. "I lose my best friend if I fail. My master will dispatch me to his sister, who he thinks worthier of my skill, my failure proof that I am better in somebody else's hands. And if I lose him—and if I fail my young master—" She swallowed sharply, loosening the waver in her tone. "I cannot have that."

Ooh, what a predicament. Taeko hummed as she eyed the two hearty killers and squeezed her high heels between sweaty fingers.

Maki pursed her lips, gun shifting. She was eyeing Peko's blade, determining how tough she was. Her free hand, shaken, approached the stripe of bruise across her exposed collarbone. Slowly her fiery gaze flickered over Taeko once more. "You. Who do you think deserves the money more?"

Oh, dear.

Taeko made an attempt to fasten a shoe onto her foot. She ducked into herself, the sweat beading down her back, and fumbled with the straps, cursing loudly to make it quite clear she was erring. She heard Peko ask her what was wrong, heard nothing from Maki, heard—*no*—knife-sharp footsteps coming, *fast*—

Taeko swung out her shoe, the long thin heel facing away from her. She hit someone. She threw the first heel, knocking Maki down, then locked—once—her gaze with trembling, pale Peko's before the second shoe smashed into her. Already Maki was surging back onto swift feet when Taeko's frigid hands folded around the balcony railing. Her pulse slammed through her palms. Shutting her eyes, she collapsed across the railing, letting gravity do the rest.

Two sets of hands tore at her, furious shuddery fists, but each snatched up air and a swatch of dress hem and Taeko fell, and Taeko *fell*, sailing down two flights of air. Flailing, she whirled around and caught on a branch, breaking her descent. Twigs and branches scraped her exposed skin. Hitting the ground, she somersaulted, landing in a heap on the grass.

Taeko lay there for some time, her heart slamming into the dirt. She breathed, and breathed, and breathed. Everything smelled so fresh. From down here, she could no longer make out the battle, now two floors above her. Her pulse was slowing. She had bruised, but not too badly. She managed to crawl onto her feet and found her gait steady. And just like that, she was fine.

Chin raised up high and haughtily, Taeko reentered the ballroom. She looked a little at the innocent, boring dancers before departing and returning to the garden, easing onto the bench once again. Hopefully, no more adventures for tonight.

She kept her head low, yet she heard footsteps approaching her. Inwardly groaning, Taeko raised her chin—and met the narrowed complexion of one familiar detective with waist-length white hair wearing a dark violet trench coat over her lilac gown. Goosebumps crept up Taeko's spine.

"Hello, Madam Detective," she croaked.

Oh, what a *lovely* surprise. Detective Kyoko Kirigiri was undercover as well. She eyed Taeko's interesting scrapes and bruises. "What did you do? There's blood on your cheek, you realize."

Flustered, Taeko touched her face and found it so. How? She had no clue. Accepting a handkerchief from the detective, she lightly rubbed it, mumbling thanks. Kyoko wordlessly took the empty spot beside her.

"I can't find Kiyotaka either," the detective admitted. "It's likely he went wherever you did. Do you know his whereabouts?"

Taeko's heart lurched. "Wh-What?" she squeaked, frantically upending her phone from her purse. She found only one text from her brother: *Where did you go?* It was dated an hour ago.

Kiyotaka.

She started to stand, legs flaring in protest. She breathed in deeply, fought the nausea swarming her mind, making her thoughts cottony. Maki's voice kept circling back through her mind, crashing down upon her, and then Taeko couldn't move any further, and Kiyotaka—she couldn't breathe—*Kiyotaka*—

A comforting hand met hers, held her in place. "Taeko. Let me search with you."

Taeko breathed out a sound like a sob, let her weight be accompanied by the detective. She smelled sweet, a muted minty perfume. Kyoko rested an arm across her back, granting her the strength to move onward.

It merely took a flash of her badge for the guard to let them through. The halls weren't so cold now with Kyoko keeping her company. As they wandered, Kyoko paid attention to tracks Taeko's bare feet had made in the carpets.

The hallways were long and barren. Taeko cringed. It was her fault if anything happened to Kiyotaka. His one rule, and what did she do but let a stranger lead her away from him. Maybe—her stomach clenched—they had recognized Kiyotaka as the successful attorney he was, and their goal all along was to put him somewhere vulnerable. Taeko stared at the floor, her mind putty in her own hands. She'd never noticed how easy she was to manipulate.

Sirens were going off faintly from the courtyard. A loudspeaker broke through the resounding blare: Something about some guy dying, dancers cordoned off to be searched. Taeko wondered whether a sword or a gun had interrupted the man's final breath.

She hoped they hadn't missed their target—hadn't hit anyone else by mistake. Hadn't hit—

Kyoko held her securely, her quick gaze scanning their surroundings for clues. "I hate your brother," she admitted. "He's too good at his own job. If he was any less careful, maybe we'd know where he went."

Taeko's mind spun. For all they knew, he could be tracking them right this moment. Or maybe...

She glanced up. Her head pounded.

Maybe he was right there.

Someone was approaching them, someone in an ugly white suit. Frantic, Taeko broke away from her support and rushed through the hall, finally collapsing when he was before her. His arms encircled her, held her close, and his head tucked against hers. His breaths were sharp, fast, but no words chased them.

Taeko felt ugly. She hid her face in his shoulder and let out a slow, nauseous sigh. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

His hands were in her hair, fraying her braid. He said nothing, just held tighter. She whimpered, reciprocated.

"Where is Mondo," she breathed, afraid of the answer.

A spell broke over her brother. Kiyotaka pulled back just enough to face her, a telltale smirk crawling up the edges of his mouth. "He got distracted talking to one of the guards again. Something concerning a bout of PTSD. The murder and following explosion exacerbated a panic."

"Murder," Taeko squeaked. "E-Explosion?"

Kiyotaka nodded firmly. “The prestigious owner of the venue was killed.”

Taeko knew she shouldn't laugh, but it bubbled up in her. The explosion was worrisome, but her brother was here now, and Mondo somehow hadn't gotten himself killed, so they would be okay.

Kiyotaka scrutinized her, noticed the bruises dappling her arms, her lack of shoes. He winced. “What happened to you?”

Taeko shook her head. “Oh, it's a long story.”

Huffy, Kyoko caught up. “One you'll gladly share with the detective of this now–opened case.”

Taeko cursed. Her brother shot her a deadly glance.

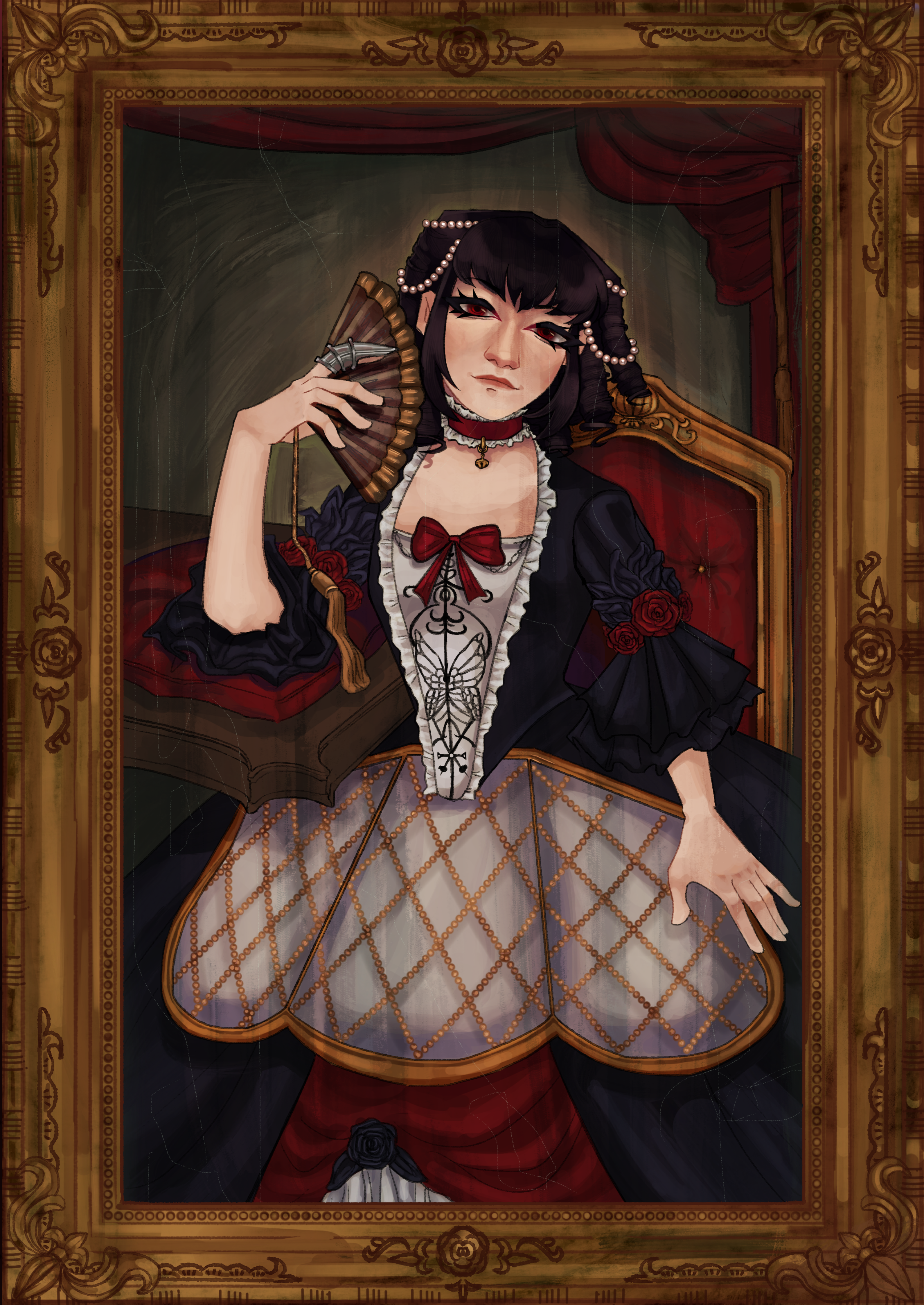
With her loved ones secured, Taeko's mind spun back to the dancing and the laughter she had shared with beautiful women who turned out to be murderers. The memories weren't so warm now.

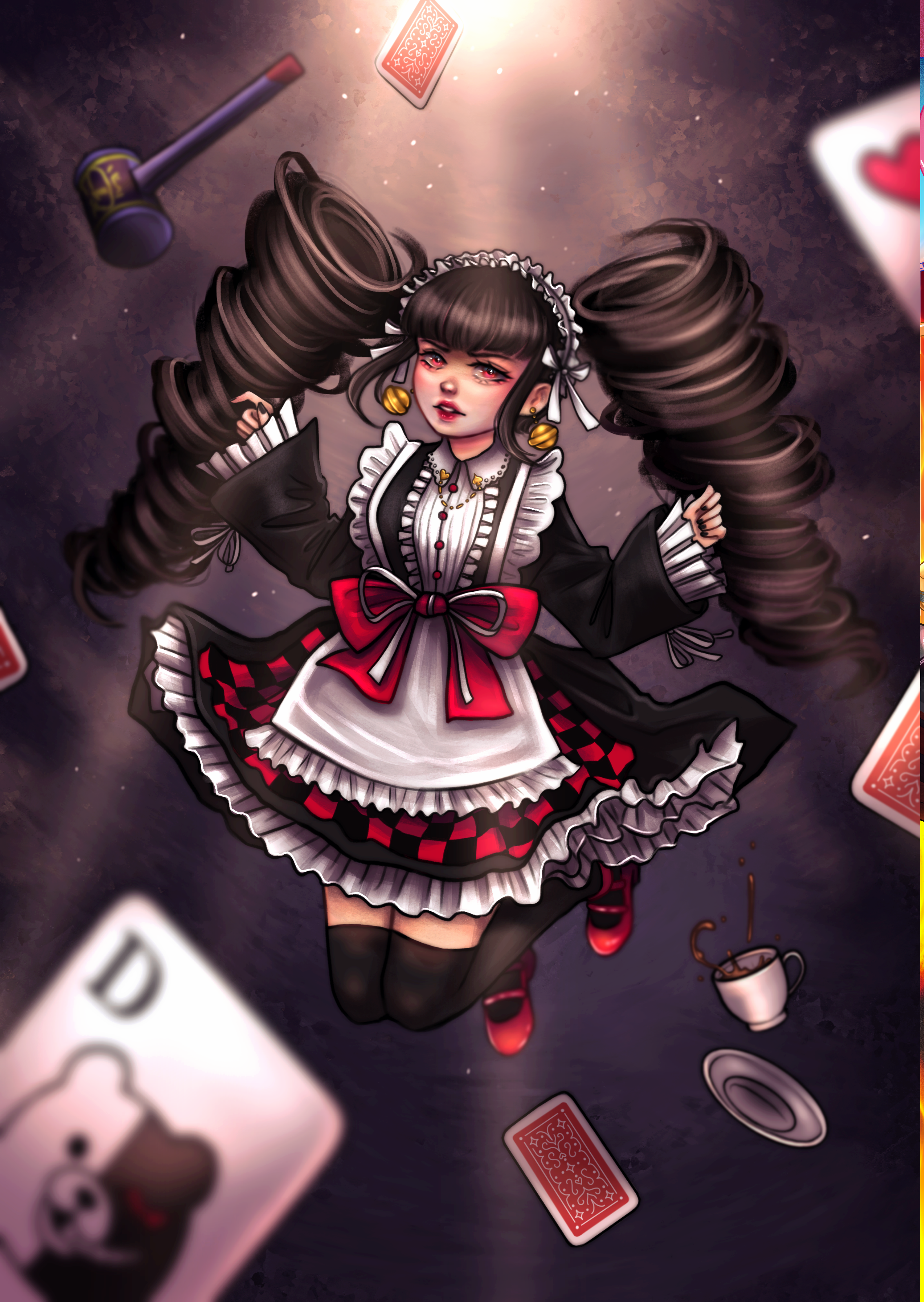
Her stomach pinched. Forcing a smile across her lips, she squinted at Kyoko and said, “On one request.”

Kyoko stared at her, deadpan. Her eyes shot open when Taeko held out a hand to her. Her brother snorted, stepped back for them.

An angry flush scribbled across Kyoko's cheeks, but, rolling her eyes, she accepted Taeko's hand. The amazing older brother that he was, Kiyotaka looked up some fancy dancing music on his phone.

Through the tinny speakers, Taeko and her partner entered their ballad.

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THE ULTIMATA
KUMA RACERS

Catsu Kun

A Seaside Game Between Liars

Written by KibaSniper

A beach was not a castle, but Celestia supposed it would do. Before her was a paradise in its own right. The water was crystal clear, extending into the horizon. Sunlight played on the waves, gently lapping against the golden shore. Not a single cloud marred the sky. And as the breeze blew, carrying the scent of sea salt, Celestia relaxed her shoulders and stepped out onto the warm sand.

Dressed in her swimsuit, she idly spun her parasol as she surveyed the perfect spot to lounge. Near the shoreline, a volleyball game ensued. Ishimaru served, encouraged by his partner, Oowada, and Saihara stumbled to bounce it to Momota. Fujisaki and Harukawa appeared to have taken the roles of the scorekeepers, and other surrounding students cheered on their classmates to strive for victory.

She would have joined them, but she wanted a moment to enjoy the serene solitude of the ocean. Spotting two monochromatically striped lounge chairs by their lonesome, Celestia hummed to herself. Again, despite its plain exterior, she supposed it was acceptable and marched toward it. Sitting down, the cushion material pressing against her limbs and back, she dug her parasol in the sand. With it casting a comfortable shade across her, Celestia folded her hands on her bare stomach, closed her eyes, and listened to the sounds of the sea.

“Heeey! I found you, Lady Luck!”

A voice she deemed shrill pierced through the calm. It overpowered the calls of the seagulls. Her eyelids grew heavy, tense as footsteps darted across the sand. She forced her expression to remain neutral, but as a cackle broke next to her, she thought, *Oh, you cannot be serious.*

She couldn’t will the intruder away. Asking him to leave would have only encouraged his antics. He might have even tried playing a childish prank on her that would have ruined her afternoon. Taking a palliative breath, she looked over and acknowledged the presence of the clownish Ouma Kokichi.

“Ouma-kun,” she drawled, crossing her legs, “what do I owe the pleasure of this encounter?”

To her subdued surprise, Ouma carried two drinks. His thumbs looped around the handles and precariously swung them, but not a single droplet dripped down the rims. Celestia straightened, prepared to leave, but Ouma plopped down on the adjacent chair, his familiar, toothy grin etched on his face.

“I was just looking for you,” Ouma said, offering the beverage. “I remembered how much you love tea, but you should broaden your palate. So, I asked Tojo-chan to brew me two of my favorite coffees.” He gently shook it. “Give it a try. I know you’ll love it, and that underserved palate will, too.”

Implying she was anything less than elegant was a tactic to grab her goat. Ouma was one to rile up another for his personal amusement, and she refused to take the bait. She simply accepted the cup, breathing in a sickeningly saccharine scent. It was a sign of too much sugar, and when she inspected the drink, she realized it resembled a liquified cookie.

“Well, I suppose I appreciate the kind gesture, but I’ll decline,” she remarked, and she tucked it in the sand, hoping a crab would steal it. “This hour isn’t suitable for coffee. It’s a morning drink, but, understandably, someone like you wouldn’t know that.”

Ouma raised his eyebrows. “Huh? You’re not going to drink it because of that flimsy excuse? And I went out of my way to bring it to you,” he huffed, mock hurt aching in his tone. He laced his fingers together and tucked them underneath his chin. “C’mon, Celes-chan, it’s an iced brown sugar latte with shaken espresso made from Austrian goat milk! It complements your high society European taste buds!” His lips stretched in a sneer. “Unless, of course, your palate isn’t as refined as you claimed?”

Celestia met his gaze with a sharp twist of her head. It seemed the game had begun the moment she accepted the drink. Dropping puckish jabs into conversations was one of Ouma’s favorite pastimes. While she lied to make her way through life and gain the upper hand, his fibbing was for the sake of a gag or seeking honest answers through deception. He either wanted to make a fool out of her, or there was something foul at play based solely on his wording.

Slipping her pinky finger through the handle, she raised the cup. “You said you came immediately here?” she asked, tracing the rim. The coffee burbled in response.

“Nishishi! I said, ‘I was just looking for you,’” he replied, raising his drink to his lips. The steamy scent wafted around his nose, and although his eyes began watering, he didn’t sip.

Celestia smiled. With a casual flick of her wrist, the coffee splashed out of her cup. A lumpy mess splattered on the pristine sand. Chunks of brown and white ooze mingled with melted sugar, becoming unsightly splotches that elicited a chuckle from the back of her throat.

"Then, why, praytell, is the drink curdled? Did you think I wouldn't notice that pig slop was tainted?" she countered, dropping the cup on his chair. As Ouma grimaced at the pale droplets sinking into his swimming trunks, Celestia sighed. "Honestly, Ouma-kun, I'm disappointed in you. If your best was a low-grade trick, you should've thought twice about going toe to toe with the Queen of Liars."

Ouma frowned and lowered his cup. The large, leftover sugar lumps swirled, reminding Celestia of chalky limescale. Clicking his tongue, he swept his fingers through his hair and rolled his shoulders back, seemingly unbothered by his derailed plan.

Instead, he shook his finger, scolding her like an elementary school teacher to a disobedient child. "Celes-chan, you could've improved your palate without ever knowing it was a lie! You would've gotten used to the taste of curdled liquid that you'd be able to drink anything. I'm so, so, so disappointed in you."

Celestia stuck up her nose. "Do you think that would make my stomach strong? That would only make me spew my lunch, a reaction that would have left you more than enthralled."

Ouma beamed and sprawled out in his chair. He dug his ankles in the sand and rested his arm behind his head. Celestia took his subsequent silence as an agreement. She lowered her shoulders and stretched out a tense knot that had formed between them, serenity returning to her mind as she basked in the cool shade, the sunlight tickling the tips of her toes.

But just as she felt a spell of drowsiness, Ouma slurped his coffee. He guzzled the sweet, thick drink down to the very last drop. Smacking his lips together and heaving a deep sigh, he remarked, "Tojo-chan *is* my mom, y'know."

Rolling her eyes, pinched with irritation, she sighed. "Well, that lie is painfully obvious. A woman who is the same age as you giving birth to you? Your nose has truly grown, Pinnochio."

Ouma sprung to life. Dropping his cup, he shot upright and snatched the smooth side of his chair. Leaning toward her, he pointed at his head. "Tut-tut, Celes-chan! Put two and two together. She has *gray* hair." He flipped through his split ends. "She's just so angelically youthful that it conceals her age!"

Celestia tapped her fingers to her chin. She let her eyes widen, and a demure tilt of her head was more than convincing to the average person. "Then, she spoiled you rotten much like the coffee you served to me."

Rather than whine, Ouma frowned. He petulantly crossed his arms, creases forming in his scowl. He shifted his side against the chair, examining Celestia with a reason beyond her current understanding. Celestia watched for his deception, curling a loose lock of fake ebony hair between her finger and thumb, only stopping when she realized his eyes zeroed in on her gesture.

A sigh escaped her. "Fine, Ouma-kun. What is it?"

"You're boring today," he flatly remarked, tapping his foot in a quick tempo. He groaned and cupped his cheek, his jaw shifting. "C'mooon, Celes-chan, I'm doing all the hard work. You're almost as good at lying as I am, so lay one on me."

He presented her with a contest that piqued her immediate interest. Celestia mirrored his posture, keeping her hands folded on her thighs. They met each other's gaze, sizing one another up like prey. Their masks were pristine, polished, and perfect. Neither lost their composure or face, allowing the waves cresting on the shore and the shouts stemming from the volleyball game to fill the silence between them.

"You want me to lie to you?" she questioned, leering at him. The corners of her lips raised in a smirk. "Or would you like to figure out if what I say is a lie?"

Ouma matched her well. "Don't be slow, Celes-chan. I already said that I was doing the hard work."

Celestia wordlessly seized the challenge with both hands. Her back arched and neck straight, she sat up properly. She clasped her hands and rested them on her knees, Ouma hardly moving an inch, and they shared a smile dripping with arrogance.

Guile was their bread and butter. He'd unveil her intentions if she exposed any hint of her visage. Words that didn't string together, a dilation of her pupils, and the slightest utterance of hesitation would make an opponent of Ouma's caliber see right through her. She needed to remain mundane, an emulation of reality that would have made Ouma question himself, and Celestia continued grinning when he yawned, his taunting earning her hushed ire.

In the corner of her eye, dolphin fins broke through the water's surface. Crabs scuttled across the pebbles, and seaweed drifted onto the shore. Once again, Ishimaru served the volleyball, and Saihara bumped it to Momota, nearly falling backward. Childish laughter echoed to the south, a sign the Warriors of Hope had arrived to play. Seagulls pecked at the bleached bones of washed-up fish carcasses. Oowada set the ball for Ishimaru, who spiked it over the net. Saihara dove, and the ball deflected off his knuckles in time for Momota's palm to connect with it. The volleyball became a white spiral, the audience gasping, Harukawa and Fujisaki utterly speechless as the seagulls took off, crowing.

Ouma chuckled. "Well, Celes-chan? What do ya have for me?"

With a sharply manicured nail, she tapped her temple. "You're about to be hit with a volleyball."

He bared his teeth in a wicked sneer. "Ha! That's an easy one! It's a lie!"

Celestia watched with a tight-lipped smile as the volleyball struck Ouma upside his head, launching him out of his seat. The ball ricocheted off Ouma's head back toward the volleyball match between their classmates. Ouma tumbled face-first into the sand, and wet grains seeped into his hair. His legs bent upward before unceremoniously flopping, finishing the imprint of his body. Celestia realized he hadn't had time to even yelp.

"Goodness," Celestia crooned with a chuckle. "Who could have predicted I was telling the truth?"

Ouma replied with a soft, agonized noise muffled by the sand.

Momota dashed over, shouting, "Hey, Ouma! I'm sorry, man! I didn't realize my own strength!"

Ishimaru followed in close pursuit, kicking up sand. "Apologies as well, Ouma-kun! Our recklessness caused your injury!"

Ouma's hand clapped down hard on the chair, jostling it. Slowly, he raised his head and peered over at Celestia, who retained her grin. Ouma raised his other hand, and the others grabbed it, helping him to his feet. He gave Celesia his full attention despite their obvious worry, his mouth twitching upward in a smirk that Celestia evenly returned.

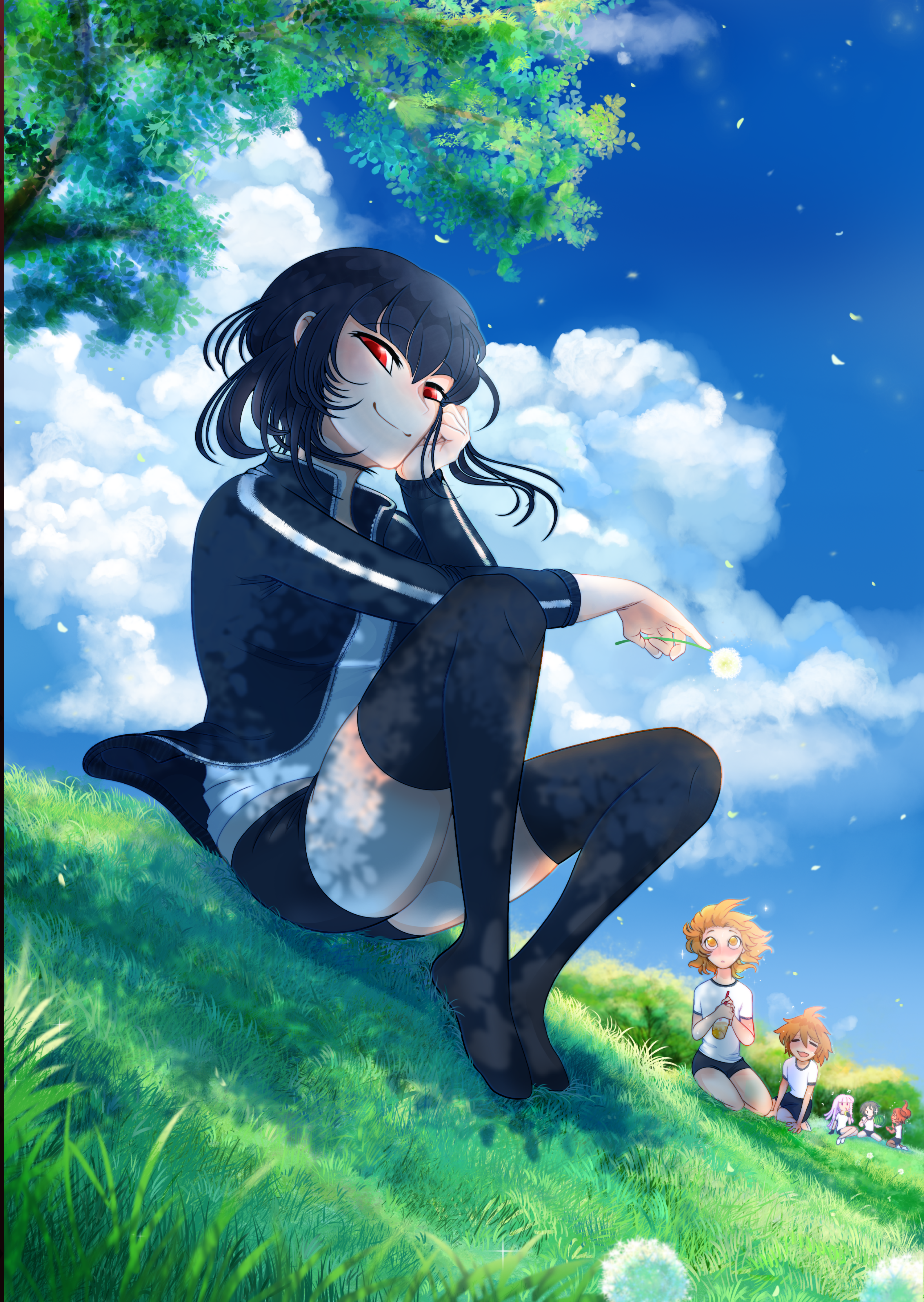
"Good job pulling the wool over my eyes, Celes-chan," he grumbled, and he hunched forward, releasing a keening wail so piercing that Momota covered his ears. "Ow, ow, ow! Momota-chan! You dimwitted beefcake! Did you wanna give me a concussion so badly? Or is this your way of flirting?"

"It was an accident, you dope! I said I was sorry!" Momota shot back, clenching his fist.

"Let's not squabble or raise our voices!" Ishimaru proclaimed, despite being the loudest. "We must take Ouma-kun to the hospital. There, Tsumiki-kun can give him a thorough inspection. Let's go posthaste!"

Celestia twisted her hand in a slow wave, and Ouma accepted her goodbye with a snicker. Delight and pride swelled in her as she lay down, pulling her parasol closer. The volleyball could have swerved in the wind or prematurely fallen. There had been a multitude of different chances for her to be wrong. And yet, she had rolled the dice, and she tasted sweet victory that was nothing like coffee mixed with Austrian goat milk. In the eyes of the unobservant, the game bordered on childish, but the gamble she had taken against the only student who approximated her lies came out in her favor.

Breathing in the sea salt, the Queen of Liars closed her eyes. She felt the breeze brush against her skin, the world melting away like the sugar in the coffee, and she envisioned her castle just across the sea's horizon.



DESPAIR
JUNE 2022
100 OUTFITS
TO WEAR IN COURT
BLACK & WHITE
MONOKUMA'S
HOTTEST LOOKS
FREE TIME EVENTS
BEST GIFTS TO GIVE
CELESTIA
LUDENBERG
HOW SHE LIED HER WAY
INTO OUR HEARTS

LET THE WORLD
GO TO HELL
JUSTICE HAMMER
35
3
5
100

Roses and Thorns

Written by Psychiccupid

By the seventh time she came into consciousness, the girl's eyes adjusted to the fluorescent lighting, finally opening for the first time. Usually, a throbbing pain felt like a jackhammer to her head, however, this time it subsided enough that she understood she wouldn't doze back into her extended slumber.

But it also meant that she had the energy to *think.*

Where am I? What is this? What do I remember?

Those questions tried to form themselves aloud, but her throat only produced a harsh, hoarse squeak, sending bitter embarrassment through her whole body.

Embarrassed? Why? Who cares if her voice wasn't perfect!?

"I care." Her mind spoke, the voice in an indefinable, yet unmissable accent. *Celeste.*

It was impossible to tell through the drowsy fog why she felt such… disdain for Celeste. Was the costume not her highest comfort? Was the performance not legendary enough that she, herself, began to believe it?

All before she–

Oh… that's right. She died.

Celestia Ludenberg… Taeko Yasahiro… they died as a maiden on fire, crushed by an incoming fire truck in front of all those she had just tried to trick. All those that would be dead if she succeeded.

Perhaps it was a good thing that she perished. Her dream was always that of a selfish one. Celeste's dream… maybe hers. Did Taeko have a dream?

The voice giggled – a little hum she'd repeated many times. "No, dear. Your dream was to be anyone else. Someone interesting. Desirable. Mysterious. *Lucky. Powerful.*" When Taeko finally sat up and gazed at something other than the ceiling, she was greeted by a much-too-white hospital room: *her* hospital room, where it looked like she'd been staying for a while. More disturbing, though, was the mirage of herself *clicking* her heels upon the tile to get as close to the bed as possible. "You wanted to be *me*. That was your dream and you succeeded with flying colors. Now no one knows you. They only know me and the palace of lies and intrigue I've created."

An immediate protest started to form out of the real girl's mouth, only to once again get caught with that same pathetic, whistling whine. Fury broiled inside her, causing her cheeks to flush a beautiful red; her matching eyes glaring daggers at herself.

"Bear got your tongue?" Celeste tutted, knowing just how much the other had secretly feared the killing game — feared losing her life, losing her Celeste's dream — feared how easy it was to get that blubbering oaf, Hifumi, to follow her commands like a real servant.

Stop, she hummed mentally, knowing the apparition could hear her. *How are you here? How am I seeing you!? I've never had hallucinations in the past.* Weak legs wobbled as Taeko forced herself from the bed, her arm immediately grabbing the frame to steady her. *I died before the game. You died during it. So why are we still here?*

Completely unphased, Celeste lifted up her hand, casually inspecting the peeling manicure. After a moment of seeming truly, truly bored, she took another step closer, then another. She continued until their noses practically touched, letting out a wonderful sigh of satisfaction before lifting her hands and placing them right under her chin, tilting her head to the side to get the pose accurate. "Clearly, it's because you still need me. Otherwise you would have woken up just fine, wouldn't you?" The hands casually dropped themselves, leaving the mirage with a smirk that left nothing to the imagination. "You can't even speak yet, can you? Are you going to cry? That always used to be our least favorite part about the real you… the *crying*—"

Taeko reacted swiftly, grabbing those cheap, *fake* frills as she assaulted the other. *Yes! And everyone liked you soooo much, you Lolita swine. No one trusted us — no* — trusts *us. We wanted to be porcelain, untouchable. Well, we're not. We're nothing better than flimsy, cracked,* "Plastic!" The last word echoed around the room, coming out much louder than intended before silence overtook them once again.

Her voice… She barely remembered what it sounded like. Slowly, experimentally, her malnourished hands released Celeste's outfit and delicately wrapped around her own throat, massaging the muscle that had just been used.

The peace didn't last long, however, as her voice seemed to attract… a *guest*.

When the hospital door flew open and the smell of lavender permeated the room, Celeste disappeared. *What a fake, even now,* her mind supplied. A fake that brought her safety, purpose… freedom.

"Good morning, Celeste. It's been a while. Sit down."

Always prim and proper that Kyoko Kirigiri. She was never the one for pleasantries or beating around the bush. Yet, Taeko still felt her heartbeat quicken in anxiety, unfortunately reminding her just how easily Celeste would've brushed it off like it was nothing.

Despite the screaming in her head telling her not to, she obeyed, sitting back down on her bed and looking at the woman with tired eyes. "Good… morning?" Her snarky remark snapped back.

Kyoko ignored her, beginning with, "It has taken you approximately seven 'wake ups' to get a functional state of consciousness. I'm impressed. It took Sakura eleven and Leon eighteen. Most others fall between eight and ten. You must've really wanted to wake up. I'm glad."

That throbbing headache that caused her to pass out every other time threatened to come back at the confusing words, so she didn't say anything. Just kept giving the girl an exhausted look that hopefully screamed 'explain more.'

Luckily, she didn't have to wait long.

"Right, sorry. Congratulations, Celeste. Everyone survived the killing game. It was all a virtual reality simulation, and you didn't really die." There was a pause where Kyoko obviously sought her reaction, but she gave none. A fond, frustrated sigh could be heard before the explanation continued. "After you pass a few tests, such as physical therapy and mental screenings, you'll be allowed back into society, meaning you can go back to your gambling habits, if you choose. That will all be discussed in more detail as you recover. Now," she changed topics quickly, "would you like to continue your stay here ignorant of the events that happened after your death, or shall I educate you from your execution onward?"

Ah, the pain had now ramped up to an awful pulsing. Though the story of 'everyone being alive' sounded completely asinine, she found herself nodding and understanding completely. It was the only answer her overworking mind could reach that connected all of the pieces together…

Her decision was instant. "Were you the mastermind, Kyoko? Did you betray me after I trusted you? I want to know everything." Perhaps too honest, in her humble opinion, but she knew Kyoko wouldn't believe her lies anyway.

From there, it was all revealed. Sakura's status as the traitor, how she took her own life after two people tried to kill her unsuccessfully. The way Alter Ego died in an execution, despite all Celeste had done to get it back into Kyoko's hands. How the fifth floor opened and revealed one of the most grotesque rooms she'd ever seen, as well as Makoto's untimely, yet false demise.

Then, Junko. Junko Enoshima. Ultimate Despair. The Mastermind of the killing game.

…

Taeko nearly laughed out loud at its absurdity; Celeste didn't let her.

Pure silence dominated the room as the detective let the truth settle, let it infect the previously deceased doll. Minutes ticked away with neither woman moving, but chapped, unpainted lips finally whispered, "Where is Junko now?" A question that both versions of Taeko would accept; really, the only question she cared to know.

Perhaps it was the wrong question, though, for Kyoko's pupils became almost like slits, causing an odd wave of nostalgia to overtake Taeko's mind before the other answered. "She's dead. For real. Was long before our killing game. Apparently she was never really trapped with us, hence the virtual reality to keep her there. Mukuro hasn't woken up yet, if you're curious. But, really, enough about that–" pure lavender eyes raked their way into Taeko's soul, "––Who are you? And where is Celeste?"

The words weren't filled with anything more than pure curiosity despite the intense look on the detective's face. No malice, accusations, joy – just Kyoko being herself, seeing a glimmer of something hidden before reaching forward to unearth it. But… would she be satisfied with the trash posing as a treasure?

"You were always so good at that." Soft words breathed out of Taeko's mouth, though she didn't understand them. Instead, the comfortable accent came back, and it was only then that she realized she hadn't been using it since Kyoko entered. "I don't know how everyone else has woken up from their beauty naps, but I assure you there is nothing to fear. I do believe I'm just a bit tired, is all, and I will be back and out of your secret–snooping hair in no time. Does this answer appease you, dear?"

So natural. So easy. So *comfortable*. Celeste was the most amazing silk glove that could cover up any blemish…

A pang of guilt rang through her as she looked towards Kyoko's protected hands. The poor woman had to actually live with that pain, unlike Taeko who just pretended. Pretended…

Always pretended.

Maybe saying she was tired… *wasn't* a lie.

"I, Celestia Ludenburg– actually, no… Taeko Yasuhiro is fine…" Just like the third trial. Word for word. This time without hours of manipulating and lying. That had all been said and done long before. No, no, *this* time, there was no game. There was no '*winning*'. Simply, the truth or a lie.

She chose the former.

Echoes of accentless screaming roared and roared in her head, nearly doubling the pain. Yet, had she ever felt so weightless? An ugly girl with her ugly self and her ugly actions. The poison apple to Snow White, or maybe the revolting hag who gave it to her.

It took a long time for her breath to release and for her red eyes to finally take on Kyoko's reaction – only to find the detective with a slight smirk and a desire for knowledge.

Taeko actually did chuckle this time, no longer being held back. Then she laughed more. And more. Until that laughter shook the entire room. Until that laughter caused her *damn smirk* to fall.

When it finally did, and damn was Kyoko persistent, all the giggling woman could mumble was, "What do you believe?" Said both with an accent, and also without.

Surprisingly, Kyoko just brushed some hair behind her own ear, let out a sigh, and sat next to her on the hospital bed. "I believe that none of us were really the people we were in that killing game. Two years is a long time, and a lot of memories to lose." Light hums left her mouth in thought before she continued. "Do you think, in the world where we all became friends, you picked one or the other? Personally, I like to believe that everyone was the opposite of how they were. Hifumi was elegant and confident… Hiro was wise and shameful… Byakuya wasn't an ass." It was truly incredible how she could just say things like that with the straightest face. "Makoto was selfish. I was carefree. And you… you just wanted us to know the real you."

Ouch. "Ah~ What a beautiful dream you have there Miss Kirigiri. I do hope you come back to reality soon." Though, the fantasy didn't sound as horrendous as she assumed it would. Throughout the whole list, Celeste didn't make a peep, and that feeling of weightlessness started to turn into emptiness.

"No matter what, she will always be a part of me, regardless of who does or doesn't like it," said Taeko rather sadly. "If I could live in my dream, in *my* fantasy, Taeko would never exist. Only interesting and mysterious people would survive and thrive. Wouldn't that be so much better?" Her hands clasped together, making the signature pose, but the smile on her face didn't reach.

As quick as she had sat, Kyoko was back up again, stretching. "No, not really. I've played the interesting and mysterious role before, and so have you." Ugh. That stupid smirk. Both Taeko and Celeste hated that smirk. "But I can get into it one more time. Say, did you know that out of the simulation, my hands are just fine?"

Bullshit. What exactly was the detective playing at? Lying to her like that?

Oh… Playing?

Turning this into a game to be won…? Fascinating, albeit *pointless*. So, in retaliation she just shrugged, paying no mind, until she felt her eyes constantly glancing to the other woman's gloves.

Anger seared through her, coursing faster than lightning. Why couldn't she just control herself? Why couldn't she stop wanting to know the answers!? Why did she have to be *Taeko Yasuhiro!?* "Why am I not her!?"

Checkmate, again. Shoved into a tiny corner twice now, if not more through her missing memories. At least she never let herself cry. Both then and now.

Quite frankly, she'd rather die for real.

"Rather dramatic, aren't you?" Kyoko simply looked at her while sporting a genuine, smirkless smile this time. "Well, I believe I've seen everything I need this session. Don't get me wrong, I am not a therapist by any imagination, but I do have authority to dictate your sessions moving forward. Truthfully, I'm surprised one simple little question about my hands caused you such turmoil. I believed we'd have to try many other things." If Taeko had any strength in her body, she truly felt the urge to deck this smug lavender bitch in her stupid face. "For now, your prescription is going back to sleep. As you wake up more, you'll recall the pain from your execution. You'll need all the rest and recharging you can get."

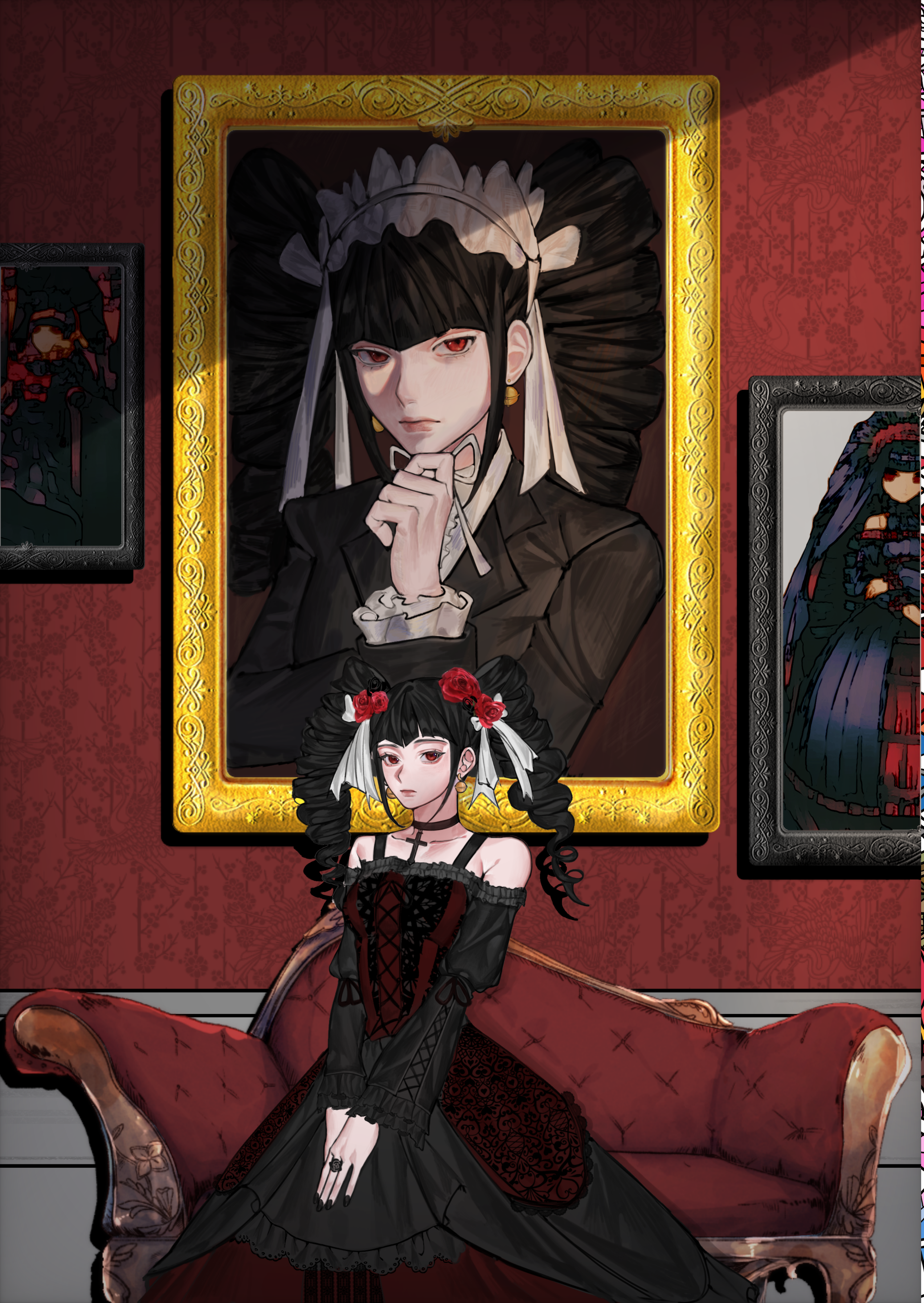
After that, she turned to leave, casually walking to the door frame before pausing and turning her head back around to say, "For what it's worth, though? I'm really excited to get to know Taeko Yasuhiro." The *click* of the door closing barely made it to the blacked-haired girl's ears through the thunderous roaring in her head.

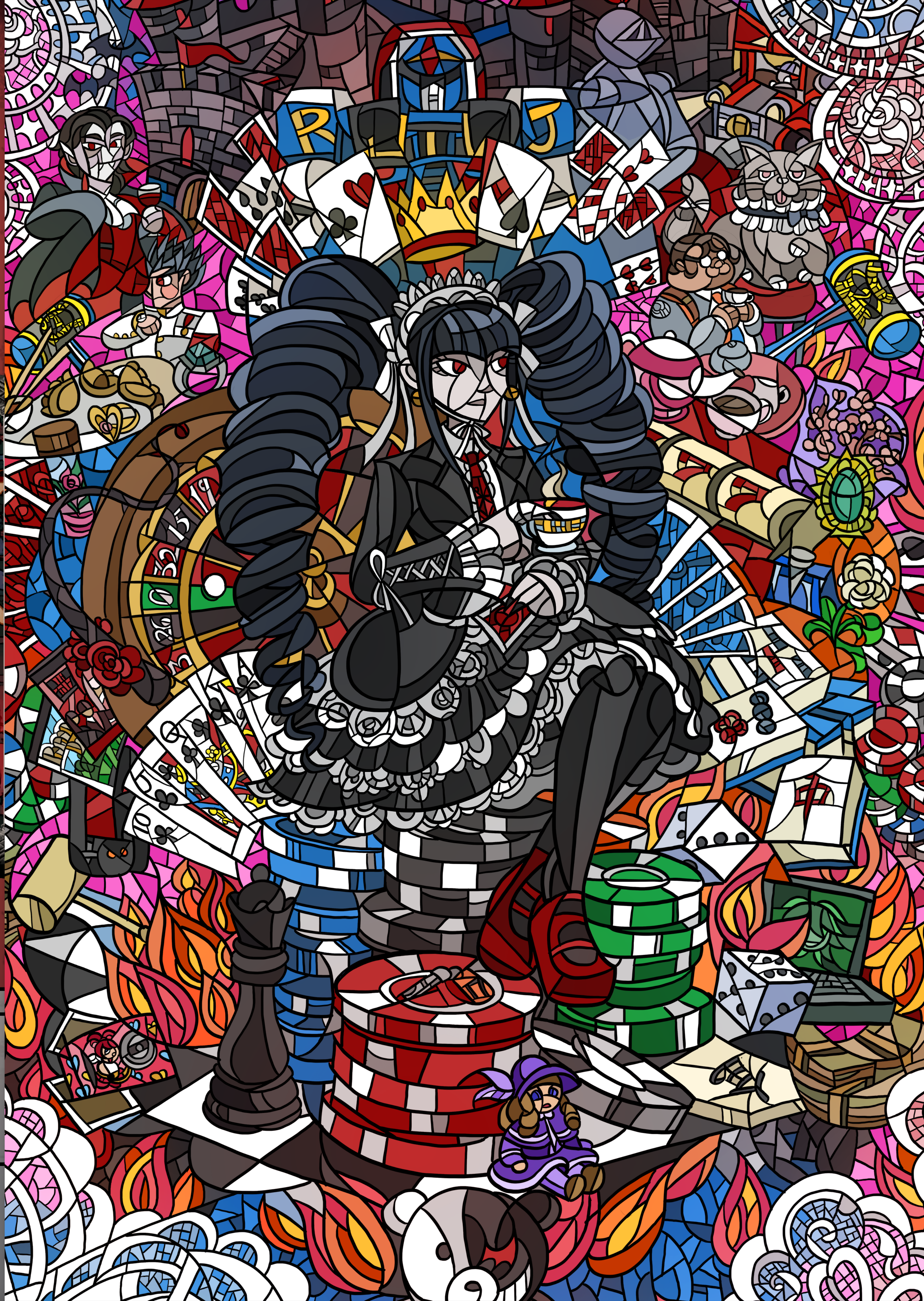
Despite it, though, she didn't move. Simply stared on at the handle that had just latched back into place. Even once her double had reappeared, scoffing, telling off that hoity-toity princess who thinks she knows everything, all the real girl could do… was smile. Smile and rest.

For no one ever wanted to meet Taeko before.

For no one ever wanted to meet Taeko until *now*.

TAYULEAN

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A Game of Truth and Lies

Written by Rin

Harsh rain beat down on the ground with the occasional large clap of thunder that shook the building. Celestia sat in front of her stained glass window, the darkened colors casting on her with every bright flash of lightning. A royal blue teacup with gold trimmings sat in her hand, the light brown tea swishing against the edges.

Her intense gaze followed the running water on the window before they trailed down to the ground. She watched as a black car pulled into the gravel driveway, rocking around as it slowly came to a stop. Not too long after, a head of unforgettable lavender hair emerged from the car door before a black umbrella covered it. Her lips curved into a smile, and her hand stopped as she watched the person gather her things.

Celestia knew precisely who the unannounced guest was; the light purple strands of hair were all she needed to see. She was Kyoko Kirigiri — a renowned detective known for her stupendous intelligence. It wasn't uncommon to see her at every investigation and piece together what happened in record time.

And of course, with a well-known figure dying unexpectedly, no wonder someone like her was here. Celestia couldn't say she *was* surprised to find such a detective standing at her doorstep. She also wasn't offended that she was deemed a suspect. In fact, she found it quite fitting for her character.

She set her tea aside and got up when she heard the slam of the door that blended in with thunder. Celestia dusted off her skirt and left her room, purposely letting the heavy black door creak open to catch people's attention. A delicate hand was placed on the handrail, her eyes trailing past the suited servants.

Kyoko stood a few feet away from the doorway and stood there confidently. Small beads of water were laced in her hair; her shoulders dampened from the oncoming rain. A gloved hand was holding onto the handle of her umbrella, and the other was hidden underneath her stylish black trench coat.

Her hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, some lavender strands resting on her shoulder. She had a white long-sleeved shirt with pointed collars and slightly puffed sleeves; her torso was hidden by a leather corset with a brass zipper on the front. She also had skinny black jeans and slightly brown boots from the mud outside.

Celestia could only look at the detective and note how professional she looked. Her face looked stoic, and it looked like she was there to do business. She knew that she should help with her investigation, but she wasn't going to make her job easier.

Kyoko tossed her coat onto her forearm and held her hand out, her leather glove glistening in the light. "Pardon my sudden appearance. I'm assuming you're Tae–"

"Please, call me Celestia Ludenburg," She interrupted, grasping onto her hand before she could finish. "I know of you, Detective Kirigiri — You're here to investigate me on the murder of Byakuya Togami, correct?"

Kyoko tightened her grip as she narrowed her gaze at her. "So, you know something about the murder?"

Celestia smiled and let out a sly hum. "Yes, of course, I do."

She looked at her, her purple eyes examining her face and reading her expression. Kyoko pulled her hand away and dropped her arm to her side. "Fine, what do you want?"

Celestia's smile grew as she put her hands together. "Let's play a game."

Kyoko lifted her eyebrow curiously. "A game? What kind of game?"

She hummed and thought about it for a bit before she shot her a curious glance. "How about a quick game of Blackjack?"

"You're quite skilled at that, aren't you?" The detective shifted in her place as her lips formed into a thin line. "That would be a disadvantage on my part, would it not?"

Celestia brought her index finger to her lips, the sharp end on her long black nail touching the tip of her rosy nose. "I suppose so… What do you have in mind?"

After a small moment of silence, Kyoko looked at her determinedly. "Chess."

"Chess?" She repeated, raising a curious eyebrow in response. She couldn't hide the fact that she's never really indulged in a game of chess before since she usually played numerous card games. But besides her inexperience with the frankly quite boring game, she knew the basic rules and knew how to get by just fine — or at least enough for it to be evident that she didn't know what she was doing.

Celestia took in a deep inhale as she straightened her posture and gave her a small smile. "That will work just fine. I'll go get a servant so we can get started."

Before Kyoko could follow up with anything else, she turned around and walked out of the room. As she disappeared past the heavy doors, she heard a servant go out to help Kyoko. A small sigh left her lips as she walked down the velvet-lined hallways, her muffled footsteps echoing around the hallways. She stopped in front of a somewhat cracked door, using the pads of her fingers to push it open.

The room was quite cramped, a filled shelf being the only furniture item in the room. Different types of games were on each level, each box nicely propped up and in good condition. The lower levels had briefcases filled with various poker chips and, of course, the chessboard that had been dusted over.

Celestia made her way over, crouching down as she slid the box out from its spot, balancing it on her knees as she looked over the picture on the box. Usually, when she was there, she would rig the games when she was here, so everything fell into place. But there was no cheating in chess, or at least that she'd known of, so she was left purely up to her skills.

She studied the picture on the front for a few more seconds before wrapping her fingers around the bottoms and getting up. The box weighed heavy in her dainty hands, the contents rattling with every step. She walked into the dining room, where Kyoko was sitting at the table all by herself. Her black jacket was resting on the back of the chair, and her umbrella was hanging on the chair's arm.

Celestia carefully placed the chess board on the table, lifting off the smooth cover. "Has no one taken your things?"

"Your servants asked to take them away for me," Kyoko paused as she reached into her jacket pocket. She pulled out a fancy black pen and a matching notebook no bigger than her hand. "I asked for them to leave my belongings with me. No offense, but I would rather know where they are."

She shook her head, her hands delicately taking out the pieces and placing them on the table. "What did you find at the scene?"

"I'm afraid that's confidential information."

"Your own suspect can't know what you found?" Celestia gave her a sly smile as she finished unloading the pieces and sat down in her chair.

Kyoko looked at her before a gloved hand reached out and picked up all the white pieces. "We found a golden dagger that was used, but he ultimately died by poisoning."

"Interesting…" She drawled out her sentence, staring at the reflective surface of the chess board. "And you're suspecting me, of all people? Have you not investigated the nurse down the street?"

She wouldn't be surprised if their critically acclaimed nurse Mikan Tsumiki had something to do with the case. She was quiet and shy, and Celestia knew better than to trust the quiet ones. They always had something to hide and kept their mouths shut, not to mention that they were the forgettable characters. She could've snuck out and got her grubby hands all over the crime scene, and no one would've suspected a thing. It must be quite the feat to effortlessly pull off something and not get caught.

Celestia intertwined her fingers and laid her palms on the table, looking into Kyoko's emotionless eyes. "Don't you think that she'd be more suspicious than me, with access to all of those medications?"

"We had interviewed her the day after, and she has an alibi." Kyoko pursed her lips as her purple eyes looked at the pieces in front of her. "She was in the middle of seeing a patient who had a grave injury, and her office didn't have what we were looking for. Her co-worker had also supplied us with the information that they are unable to order anything without the permission of their supervisor. So therefore we took her off our suspect list."

She clicked her tongue and tapped a finger on the back of her hand. "Who else have you interviewed?"

Kyoko's eyes moved to look at her, and a small frown formed as she wondered if sharing that information was necessary. But regardless of the answer, she inhaled through her slightly parted lips. "We looked into his former assistant, Toko Fukawa. We discovered that she was recently fired for an unknown reason and asked her some questions."

Ah, Fukawa. She had almost forgotten about that pitiful girl, nor was she surprised to know she was a suspect. Celestia had always felt that something was *off* about that girl, other than her overwhelming feeling of distaste for her. Whenever she was in her presence, she felt uneasy that she was being watched and always felt holes drilled in the back of her head. When Byakuya would make crude remarks about her in front of her, Celestia would always note the burning rage in her eyes and her hand dart to grab something. She had the feeling that she miraculously would have an alibi and have her ass saved yet again.

"And? What did you make of *her*?"

"She had an alibi."

I knew it. Celestia gritted her teeth, and her eyebrows furrowed in annoyance for Toko being let off the hook. "What made you change your mind?"

"Byakuya died at 8:30 pm sharp, and the librarian at the time, Nagito Komaeda, saw her walk-in at 6 o'clock. He said that Toko stayed there and read until the building closed at 9 and she supposedly went home. It would be impossible for her to leave the building without being caught."

"I see, and I'm guessing that you haven't talked to anyone else."

"No, but…" Kyoko trailed off as she shifted, reaching her hand out to move her pawn two spaces. Her fingertips held the head of the piece as she stared her down. "Where were you the night of Byakuya Togami's murder?"

Celestia couldn't help but let her lips form a smile from the game finally started. She inhaled deeply through her red lips as she untangled her fingers and moved her pawn. "I was at his mansion since I was invited to a party that he was throwing. I had no real interest in participating, but I went to make an appearance."

Kyoko picked up her pen and flipped to a blank page as she started to jot it down. She laid her pen down before she moved her pawn forwards once more. "How long were you there?"

"I made my appearance around 6:30 and I was there until we were all made to leave."

"It's rumored that you didn't have a good relationship with Byakuya Togami, is this true?" Kyoko slid a new pawn two spaces, her index finger going to her knight.

Celestia sighed, knowing that it would be near impossible to try to lie her way out of this one. She had no nice thing to say about him, and she was sure that it was apparent to any onlooker. Togami always struck her the wrong way, and she never liked how he wore his pride and privilege on his chest. His glares down at her, his permanent frown, and how he always tried to make himself greater than he was. At the end of the day, he was just an average-looking guy with a lot of money, and Celestia wasn't afraid to point that out to their face.

They had arguments and disagreements in the past due to hating each other's characters. She was glad to hear the news of his untimely death at the party and could only mutter "good riddance" under her breath. She hoped his death would've gone away like the wind, but she forgot that important people got special treatment—what a shame.

Celestia moved her pawn in what she figured was an illegal move. Kyoko didn't say anything about it, but it was swooped up by her knight immediately after.

"That is true, I hated the man," She watched Kyoko move another piece as she reached out to make her move.

"Then why did you bother going to the party if you hated his guts?" Kyoko maintained eye contact as she slid her hand across the board. "It doesn't seem to make sense as to why you would go if you had to interact with him."

"As stated previously, I wanted to make an appearance," Celestia tapped her heel against the tile ground, moving a knight to a random tile. She didn't have any particular strategy at this point, but she hoped it looked like she had one. "There were people there that I wanted to make a good impression on. Byakuya also owed me money, so I went to haggle him so I could get it."

"He owed you?" Kyoko's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, her hand reaching for her pen. "How much?"

"Five thousand. He tried to make a bet that he would win a game and ultimately lost. Like the *coward* he is, Byakuya left without a word and didn't give me anything in return," Celestia looked down at the other's notebook, watching her write down a summarized version of her words.

"Did you get it back?"

Celestia scoffed and tried to hold back a laugh. "Of course not. He refused to admit that he owed me anything and insisted that *I* lost."

She decided that it would be better to leave out the fact that she had threatened him if he never paid her back. She had pulled him away from the crowd and into a storage closet and demanded that he pay her back, or he'd regret it. Out of fear, Byakuya agreed that he'd have her money by the end of the night, and they left their separate directions. Of course, before she could do anything, he was found face down in his office in a pool of blood. They were then asked to leave the premises immediately, and Celestia never got her money back.

The drop of Kyoko's pen took her out of her thoughts. She watched her grab the head of a chess piece and glide it across the board with ease. "I see… You said that you wanted to make a good impression on someone, right?"

"That's correct. The princess of Novoselic came to visit our puny little town, it's said that she's here to visit an old friend or something along those lines." She moved over one of Kyoko's pawns and moved it over to the side.

Sonia Nevermind was… an interesting person to say the least. She was an aloof, easygoing, gullible person who enjoyed serial killers. Celestia couldn't lie that she was a little taken aback when she casually talked about her fascination with them. She didn't expect that a princess of all people would like that kind of thing, but she was wrong. Although her and Sonia had a nice talk about the murders in town, she wasn't necessarily wanting them to be all buddy-buddy. If anything, she wanted to be close enough so she benefited from being "friends" with her.

Kyoko jumped her rook over hers and let out a hum. "And? Did you get what you wanted?"

"I'd say so, we had a decent conversation before Byakuya was killed." Celestia hummed as she slid a bishop to the middle of board. "You said that you found a golden dagger?"

"Yes," She slyly slid her queen over her opponents bishop. "I believe… you have a similar one as well?"

It didn't take a rocket scientist to know where she was trying to get to. It was true that Celestia had a set of 5 golden daggers that was most likely similar to the ones at the scene. One of the blades was currently missing, but it was around the house somewhere and certainly not in someone else's house. And of course, there was no reason for Kyoko to know the truth.

"I do have similar ones, but they're silver." Celestia smiled as she moved her knight, "you can't have too many gold things, can you?"

Kyoko's jaw tightened as she moved another piece closer to her side of the board. "That's true, I suppose."

"And besides, I couldn't be the only one suspicious, can I?" Celestia hummed as she realized just how close she was to losing. "There are rumors that Toko Fukawa is a suspected serial killer a couple towns over, with no known reason as to *why* she was fired. And besides, I bet that you haven't even started to look into Sonia Nevermind. She might have the gold daggers that you're looking for."

"Those are just rumors, they don't really mean anything unless we have evidence. And didn't you become friends with Sonia?"

"That's true, but you can't trust anyone, I'm sure you know that well." Celestia hastily moved a random piece to hide her king. "Why are you so adamant that it was me that killed him anyways?"

Kyoko looked at her for a second before she slammed a piece down the table. "Two people at the party said that they saw you close to his room around the time of his death. An additional person recalled that you were missing up until they asked everyone to leave. That's pretty suspicious, don't you agree?"

Celestia looked at her with her jaw tight and hairline wet with sweat. She let in a shaky sigh and looked at the board as she analyzed every piece and every possible move. She knew better than to panic and start to randomly move pieces without a plan. She composed herself, re-examined the situation, and made her move.

"It is true that I was there, but it was because he had asked me to see me."

Kyoko raised a curious eyebrow. "He did?"

"Yes, he did." Celestia smiled as her eyes followed her movements. "One of his servants told me that he wanted to have a discussion. I assumed that he was going to give me my money back, however that wasn't what I got."

"So… someone was trying to frame you?" Kyoko's voice was dripping in disbelief at what she was just told. She didn't even bother reaching for her pen, her eyes just stayed glued on the board.

"Of course, that's what it appears to be." Celestia looked at her as her lips curled into a sly smile. "And, it seemed to work since I'm your number one suspect, correct?"

Kyoko narrowed her gaze as she leaned in, her fingers intertwined with one another. "Celestia— or should I say, *Taeko*, you killed Byakuya Togami, didn't you?"

Bingo.

Celestia let the smile grow as she delicately placed her final piece in front of Kyoko's king. "Checkmate."

Kyoko kept her gaze on her before letting out a sigh of defeat and put her palms on the table. "That's all the questions that I have for you."

She hummed as she got up, hee heels clicking as she walked to the side of the table. "I see, come back if you need to ask any questions."

"I will, thank you for letting me ask questions." Kyoko gathered her things and slipped on her black trench coat. They gave their final farewell before the detective walked out of the building, the static of rain filling the vicinity.

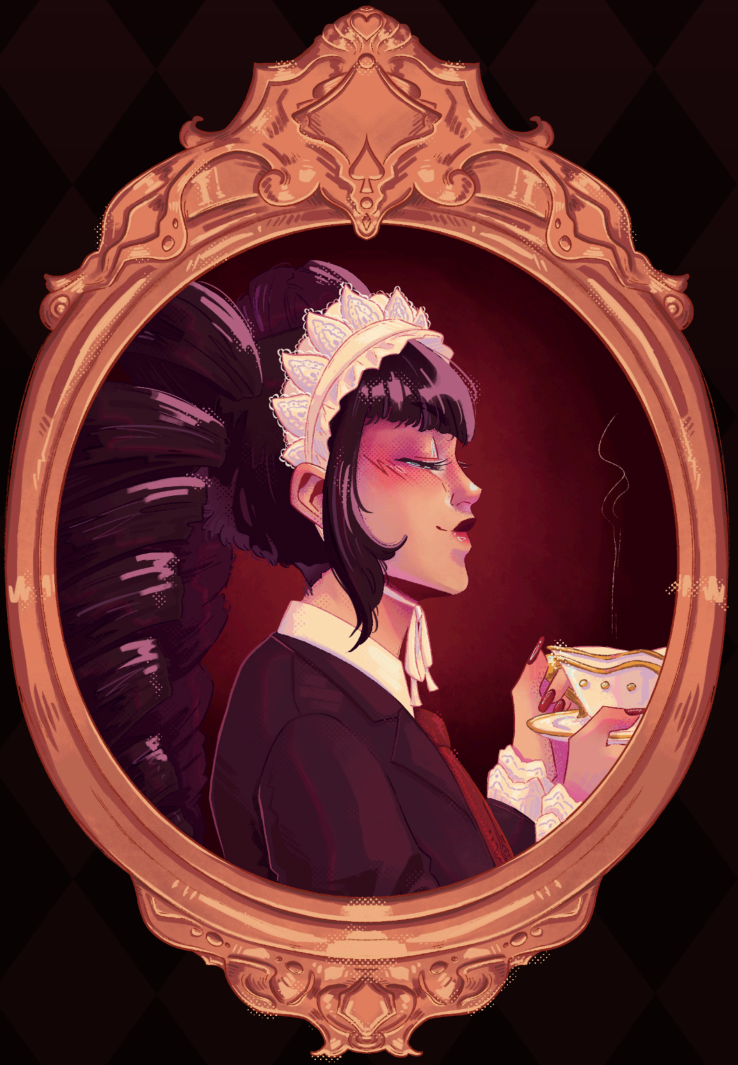
"Joseph!" Celestia turned to look at a servant standing in the corner of the room.

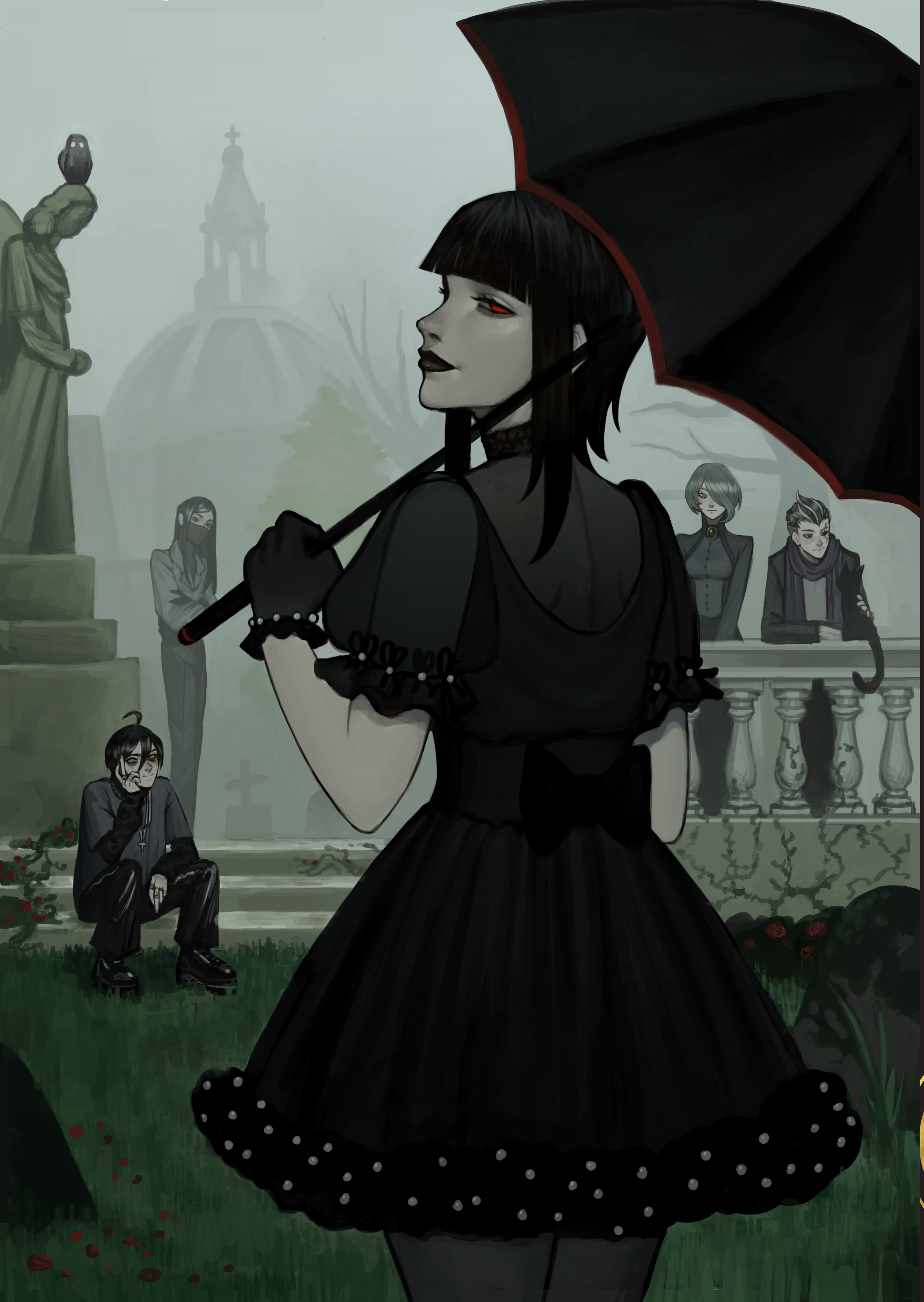
"Yes, Madam Ludenberg?" The tall and lanky man emerged from the shadows.

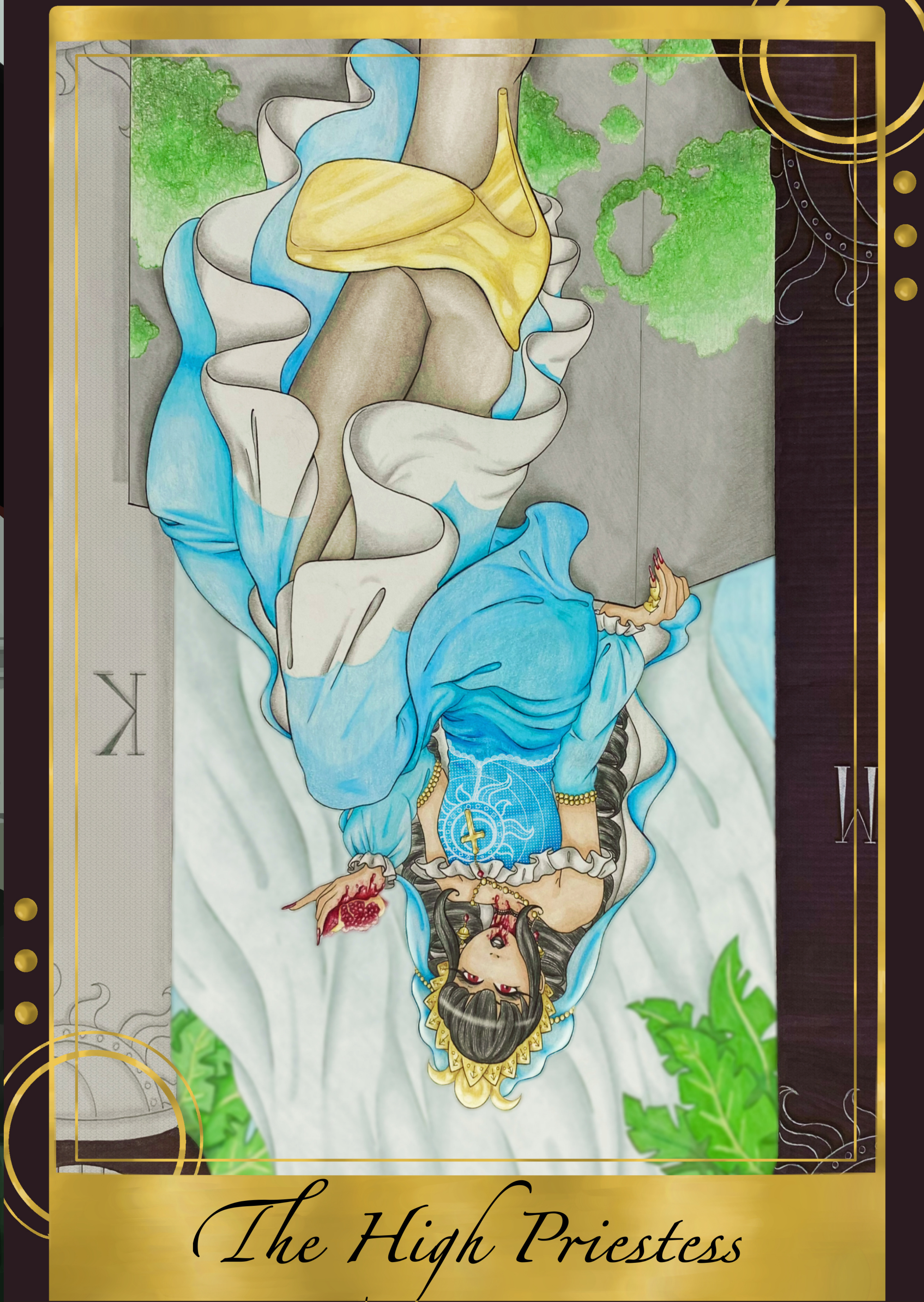
"Make sure she doesn't get any more information, will you?"

"Of course, Madam." He gave her a bow before walking off.

Celestia smiled as she watched him grow further from her. She let out a content hum as she turned to walk up the stairs, confident that no one would know the truth.






The High Priestess

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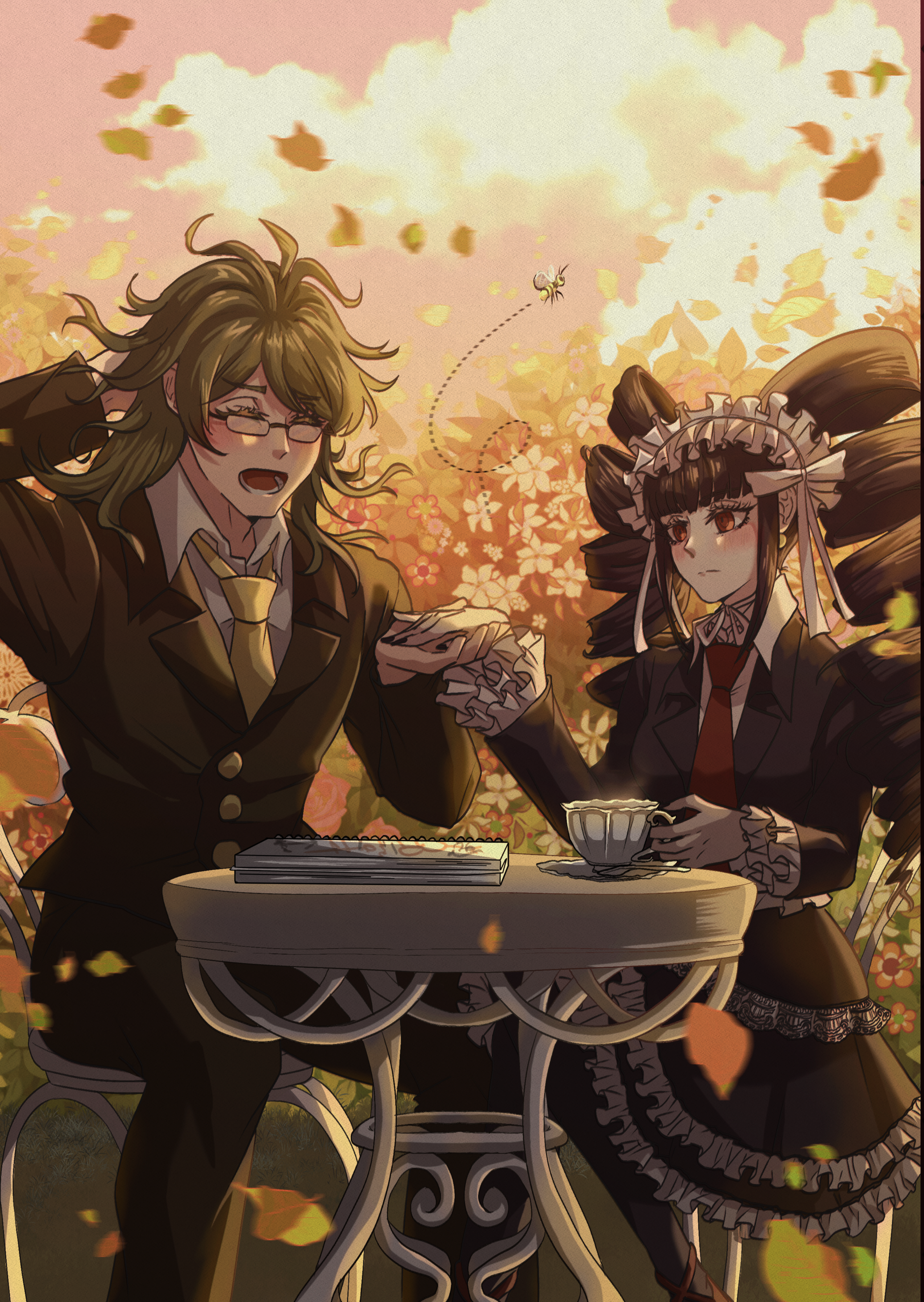


The Queen Bee Befriends The Entomologist

Written by Omori
Illustrated by Niinia

To Celeste, there was (almost) nothing that could be better than savoring milk tea and freshly made biscuits in a flourishing garden. All of the bushes were perfectly trimmed, the flowers were due to bloom any day now, and the aroma of it all was a delight. Plus, with solitude given in her favor this time around, she was relieved to have quality alone time. A gambling princess like herself needed that; it was just as essential as one day obtaining a European castle filled with handsome male servants dressed as vampires. Such a desire was still high, of course, but this would do for the meantime. There wasn't anything to complain about anyway.

At least, that's what she thought. She proceeded to reach for another biscuit when a familiar buzz made her freeze in place. Her bright red eyes darted towards the source of the sound, her heart stopping at the sight of a disgusting, black–and–yellow creature: a bumblebee. The little creature was simply sitting on a biscuit, paying no mind to the human in front of them. Sadly, they were also unaware of Celeste's aggravation. They didn't feel like they were in danger until a sudden movement scared them. Celeste wasn't going to sit around and let it ruin her relaxation. She was going to get rid of that thing, one way or another.

"Oi, you stay the hell away from me!" Celeste shouted, swatting the bee away. She gritted her teeth every time it buzzed right by her ear and in front of her face, ignoring its warnings. Just the buzzing alone was annoying, but its persistence was testing her patience. "Go away, goddamnit!"

Her attempts were futile; the bumblebee kept coming back, just as frustrated as she was. She was a bit surprised that it hadn't stung her by now, but she was also obviously grateful. Eventually, she managed to successfully hit the insect with her hand, launching it towards the small table. It slammed into it with an inaudible 'thud', now reduced to crawling and barely making a buzz.

"I won't tolerate you pests while I'm enjoying myself," Celeste said, one of her eyes twitching as she raised her hand. "Ugh, I can't believe I have to deal with this, but oh well. At least I have the actual nerve to take care of this, unlike some scaredy–cats I'm aware of. Screw off and say goodbye."

“Wait, wait! Please don’t hit little bumblebee!” A nearby voice begged.

Celeste’s hand stopped midway as she glanced up, curious to see who was stopping her. Any potential surprise vanished upon seeing it was Gonta, who almost ran right into the table and Celeste herself. He gently scooped the bumblebee right up with his free hand, concern written all over his face. He took a few moments to observe the bumblebee before speaking again.

“It’s okay now, bug friend. Bug friend is safe now! Bug friend looks hurt though,” Gonta said, his concern turning into sadness. “Miss Celeste, did you hurt bug friend?”

“Yes, but I can assure you it was merely on accident,” Celeste lied, fidgeting with a strand of her hair. “I reacted on my instincts without thinking, and the next thing I knew, I had hit it. I’d *never* hurt it on purpose.”

“Oh okay, good! Gonta is glad it was on accident. Accidents happen, so Gonta forgives you. But now, Gonta needs to figure out how to help injured bug friend…” Gonta looked around in hopes of finding a solution, and perked up when he spotted some sunflowers. “Gonta’s got it!”

Gonta walked over and carefully set the bee on the sunflower, watching to make sure it had a secure grip on it. Once it started crawling more and went to work on collecting pollen, Gonta returned to Celeste with a satisfied grin.

“Bug friend is safe and happy now!” Gonta exclaimed.

“I suppose that’s a relief.” Celeste said, disappointment vaguely laced within her tone. “I must say, I wasn’t expecting to see you here. In fact, I wasn’t expecting to see *anyone* here.”

“Gonta wanted to take a walk and see his bug friends! Such a beautiful day outside, and that means many bugs are out, too. Gonta didn’t know Miss Celeste was already here, but Gonta’s glad to see her anyway!”

If only the feeling was mutual, Celeste thought to herself.

“Oh, Gonta has a question for Miss Celeste.”

“Ask away then.”

“Does Celeste not like bumblebee friends? Does Celeste not like bugs at all?” Gonta asked with a frown.

Celeste could feel herself begin to tense up, ready to give a heated yet honest answer on how she feels towards bugs. If it was anyone else, she would’ve just winged it, making her disgust towards bugs *very* clear. But for some unknown reason, she couldn’t find it in her to do that with Gonta. Instead, she shrugged and plainly said: "Isn't it obvious? Bugs are nothing more than gross, annoying vermin. Here I am, trying to enjoy my afternoon tea and biscuits, when that *thing* tried to ruin everything. Wouldn't you react the same way?"

"No, Gonta wouldn't! Gonta would let bumblebee friend eat with him, but he would probably give flowers to it instead. For them, flowers are healthier than biscuits. Gonta's sad to hear Miss Celeste thinks that about bug friends," Gonta admitted. With the right amount of explaining, he could understand any genuine bug-related phobias, but a general distaste towards them made his heart feel heavy. That's when he decided he should be a gentleman by trying to convince Celeste to like bugs (or at least, convince her to like bees). "Miss Celeste still wants a castle someday, right?"

"Of course I do. And I vow to make that happen, no matter what it takes. Why do you ask?" Celeste asked.

"Gonta read in books that queens have castles. So if Miss Celeste gets a castle, then she'll become a queen, and that reminds Gonta of queen bee friends! Gonta hopes you will become a queen bee one day!"

"A queen bee?! You wish for me to become an ugly insect?"

"No, Gonta doesn't want Miss Celeste to become real bug! Gonta's sorry for bad choice of words; Gonta didn't mean to make you sad. What Gonta meant was that Gonta hopes you become a beautiful queen and rule a castle, just like a queen bumblebee does!"

"I–I beg your pardon?" Celeste felt her face grow warm, and she could only hope there was no red on her pale cheeks (deep down, she knew she was red in the face). Clearing her throat in an attempt to regain her composure, she sat back down in her chair. "If you have the time to spare, I'd be lying if I said that I… wasn't curious to hear about these queen bees that you speak of. I never knew of such up until now, and I recall your Ultimate clear as day, so perhaps you'd like to enlighten me?"

Gonta gasped and nodded, sitting down across from her. "Gonta would love to! Gonta even has a drawing of them in sketchbook. Would Miss Celeste like to see it?"

"Sure. Entertain me."

Gonta showed off the green sketchbook he had been carrying in his other hand. He flipped through it before landing on the drawing he wanted, showcasing it to Celeste. It wasn't Ultimate Artist quality, but the passion and love that was put into it was clear to see. Plus, it was obvious which one was the queen bee, as a small gold-colored crown had been doodled on top of its head. Surrounding the queen bee were a bunch of tiny regular bumblebees, and next to the doodled queen bee was a wide range of notes, handwritten by the Ultimate Entomologist himself (his handwriting could gradually be improved upon, but it was still eligible).

“This is the queen bee! This is one of Gonta’s favorite bugs. Gonta likes all bugs, but queen bee is really special to Gonta because Gonta respect queen bees! Respect like true gentlemen,” Gonta began. “Queen bees are important in bee hives. Queen bee is largest bee in colony, and colony cannot live without a queen.

Queen also has stinger that can be used many times, so queen can protect herself and her bee family. Oh, and queen even has attendants that take good care of her. Queen's attendants feed her, clean her, and take away waste. They even digest food for queen before queen eats it, like mama bird with bird family! This is why Gonta gives queen bees much respect."

"Now I understand why you compared me to them in the first place, even down to the attendants. Although, I have far too much dignity to make my butlers chew my food for me; feeding me with proper cutlery is all I would ask for," Celeste said. "So, it sounds like only the queen bees are superior, with her servants taking good care of her. Is that correct?"

"Kinda. Worker bees are also important cuz they work a lot! They do more than feed the queen. Worker bees also do housekeeping, take good care of drones and little larvae, get pollen and nectar, and make wax. Putting queen bee and worker bees together makes for working colony, and working colony makes for good ecosystem, and that's good! Good ecosystems makes Gonta happy."

Celeste hummed in response, sipping her tea. The more thought she put into it, the more she realized that she *was* similar to queen bees. Granted, her beauty, her grace, and her ability to thrive through lying would always topple over the queen bee. That was a given. But she figured it wouldn't hurt to give the queen bee a tiny bit of credit. Some were better than none. It was a start; she was now open to discussion about the insect, and if it was with Gonta, then she knows she's getting authentic knowledge and facts. She tapped her pointer finger and opened her mouth to speak when a loud buzz caught her attention. She assumed it was just another bumblebee, or perhaps the same one from before, but looking over at it on the table confirmed otherwise.

It was a wasp, and its beady eyes were looking directly at her.

It took everything in her to not jump in her chair or swat at it, but she couldn't do anything about the startled squeak she made. So bumblebees weren't *that* bad; they possessed a big purpose and most people were generally okay with them. But anyone with enough sense would know the true nature behind wasps, and how they're basically flying aggressive fighters. Basically, this wasp needed to *go*.

"Miss Celeste, it's okay! Gonta knows what to do," Gonta said, impulsively reaching across the table and grabbing Celeste's hand as a way to console her. "You and Gonta stay still. Wasp will go away, Gonta promise."

Both of them sat as still as possible, hearts pounding. The wasp inched its way towards the biscuits, observing them curiously. Then it took a closer look at Celeste's teapot, the tea's sweet aroma enticing it. It felt like the wasp was there for centuries, teasing them for no apparent reason. But finally, the wasp flew off, as though it didn't put anyone on the edge of their seat. Once the wasp was completely out of sight, their sighs of relief came out in unison. It took a few solid seconds for them to realize they were still holding hands though, causing both of them to blush.

"G–Gonta's so sorry! Not very gentleman of Gonta to grab your hand without asking first. Gonta hopes you're not mad."

"Tch, n–normally, I'd release hell on anyone who did this without my permission! And even with my permission, it wouldn't last long. With that being said," Celeste noted how warm, muscular, and cracked Gonta's hand was. It was in total contrast to her cold, fragile, and silky smooth hand. She found strange comfort knowing that. She didn't attempt to retract her hand from Gonta's. "Y–You should consider it an honor to hold my hand. Usually, I charge people to hold my hand, but I'll make an exception in exchange for your queen bee lecture."

"Aw, thank you so much! Miss Celeste is sweet like bee honey. Gonta don't have money, so Gonta wouldn't be able to pay you if he had to. Gonta's so happy now!" Gonta brightly smiled, beaming with joy.

"Moving onto another subject real quickly, why do you keep addressing me as 'Miss Celeste'? I'm not complaining by any means; I find it to be polite and maybe even endearing. However, there must be a reason behind it, no?"

"Gonta want to be great gentleman, and gentlemen call girls 'miss', especially if girl is going to be queen one day! Gonta just want to treat you with respect and kindness, as that is what you deserve and that is what gentlemen do."

"... I see. Well, from here on out, simply refer to me as 'Celeste'. Can that be done?"

"Yes, it can be done! Gonta will call you 'Celeste' starting right now. Can Gonta ask Celeste another question?"

"Why not? I'm all ears."

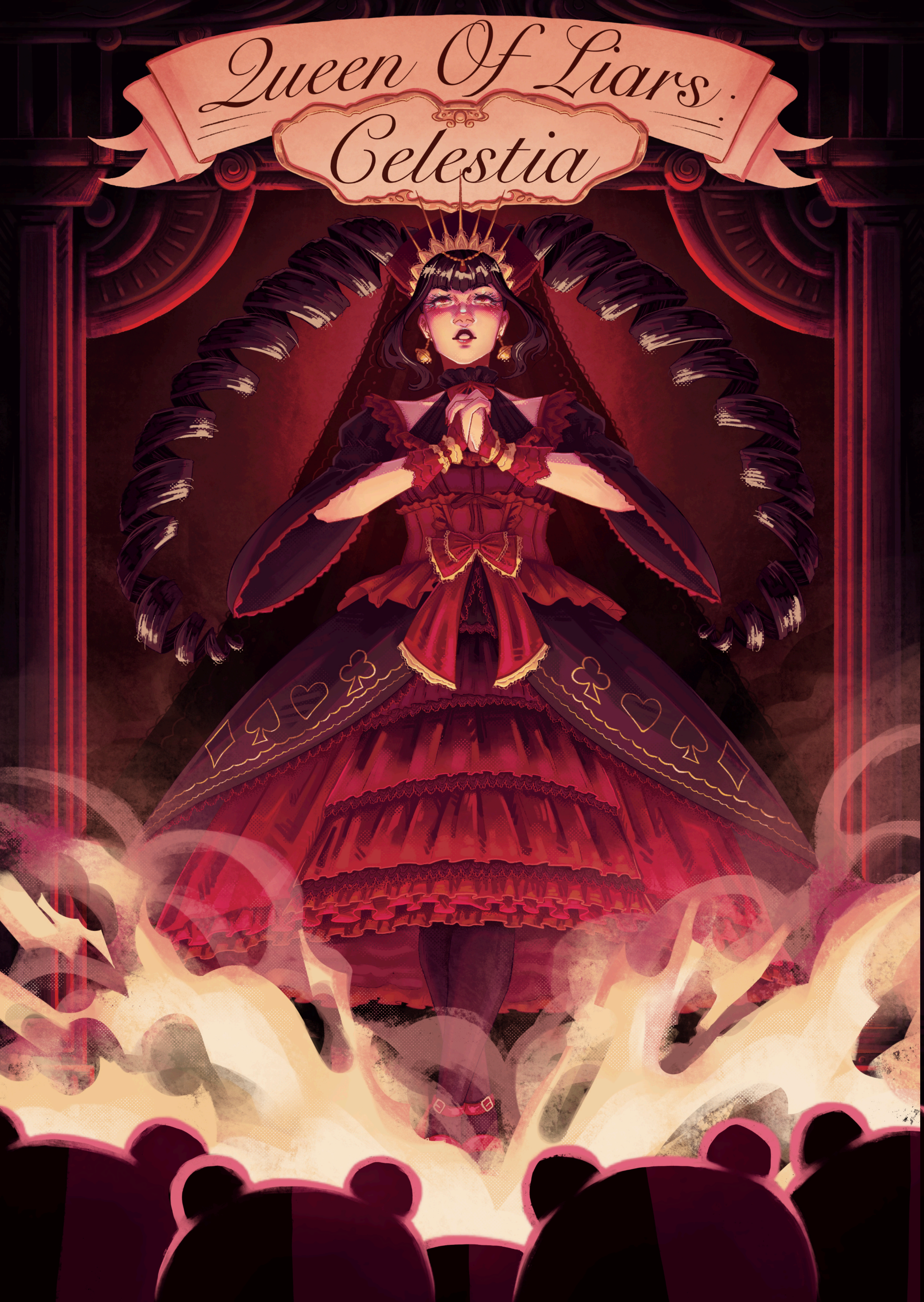
"Would you be okay with Gonta talking more about bugs? Gonta thinks you may like other kinds of bugs! Oh, but Gonta will only talk about other bug friends if Celeste wants him to," Gonta said, rubbing the back of his head bashfully.

On any other given day, and with any other person, Celeste would say no and move on about her day. She can only handle talking with someone below her for so long before it grows tiresome. But on the other hand, there was an odd yet indescribable charm to Gonta; a charm she couldn't exactly place her finger on. She knew that bugs wouldn't suddenly become her new favorite thing any time soon (and probably never), but the passion Gonta had when rambling about them intrigued her. She wanted to hear more, and while she'd never admit it out loud, she began to enjoy his company. He was a bit on the eccentric and loud side, sure, but she could grow used to it. She could use a change of pace in her daily routine anyway.

"You know what, Gonta?" Celeste smiled. "I'd be delighted to hear you talk more about bugs. Perhaps if you try hard enough, I'll start to tolerate the critters."

"Really? Gonta is 'over the moon' to hear that. Not literally over the moon though, cuz moon is too far away. Gonta will do his very best to show you how grea bugs are! Gonta thinks he'll start with black witch moths..."

And thus, the rest of Celeste's afternoon was spent listening to Gonta babble away about all sorts of bugs. She didn't initially plan on having a bug-loving dork take up her time, but she wouldn't have had it any other way.


Queen Of Liars:
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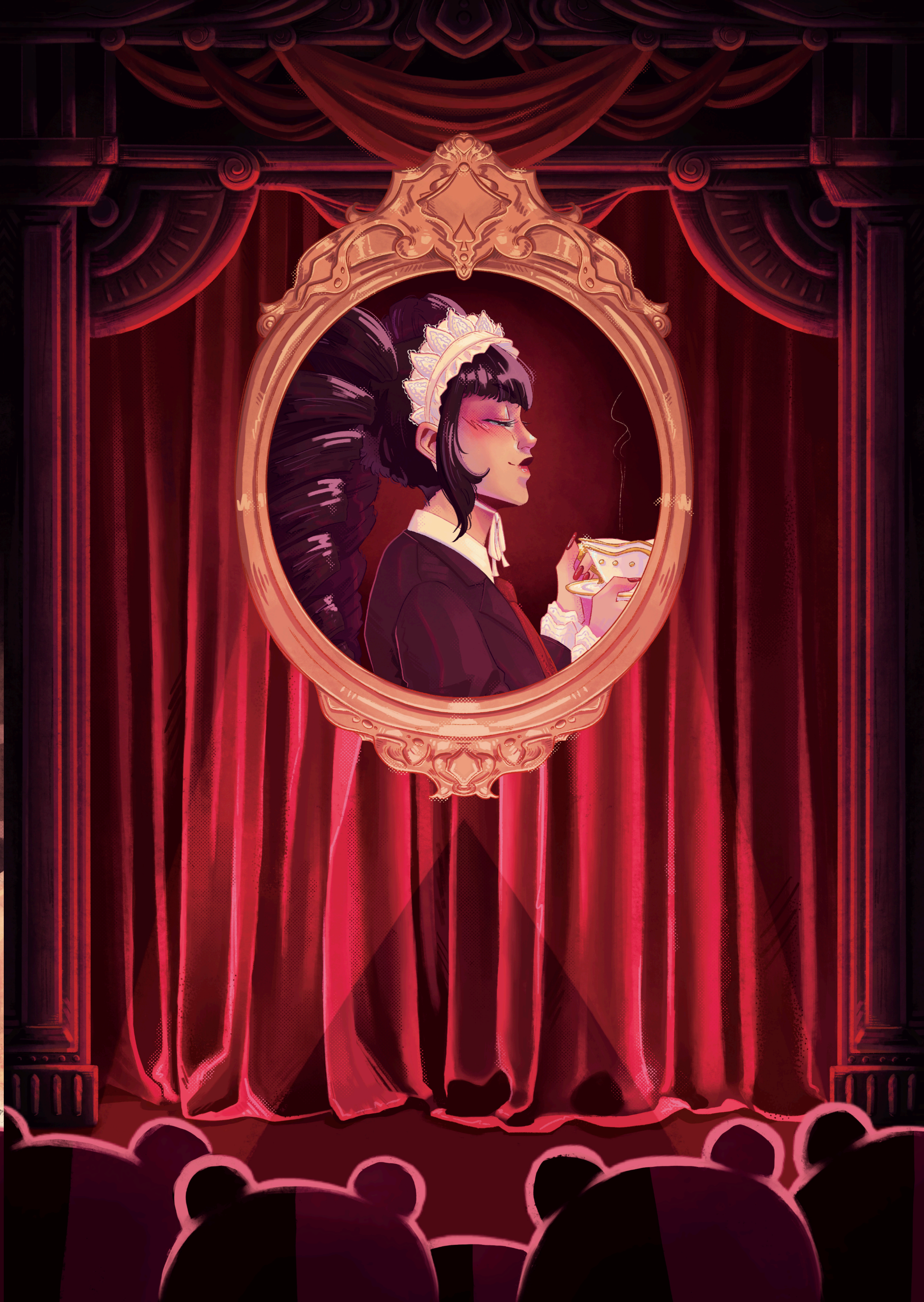

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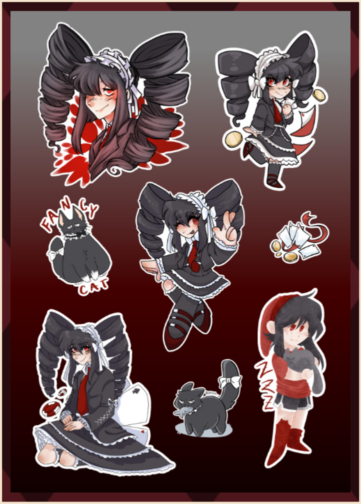
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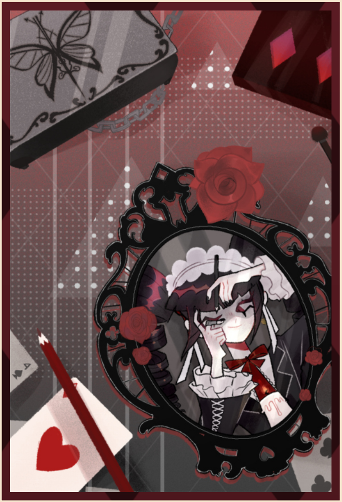
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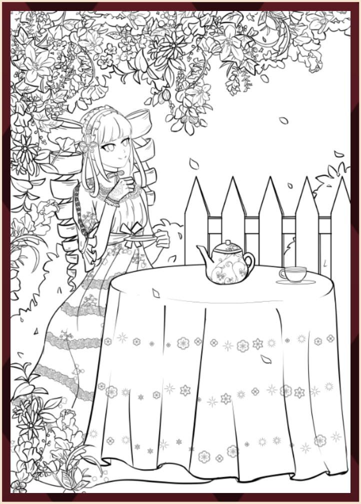
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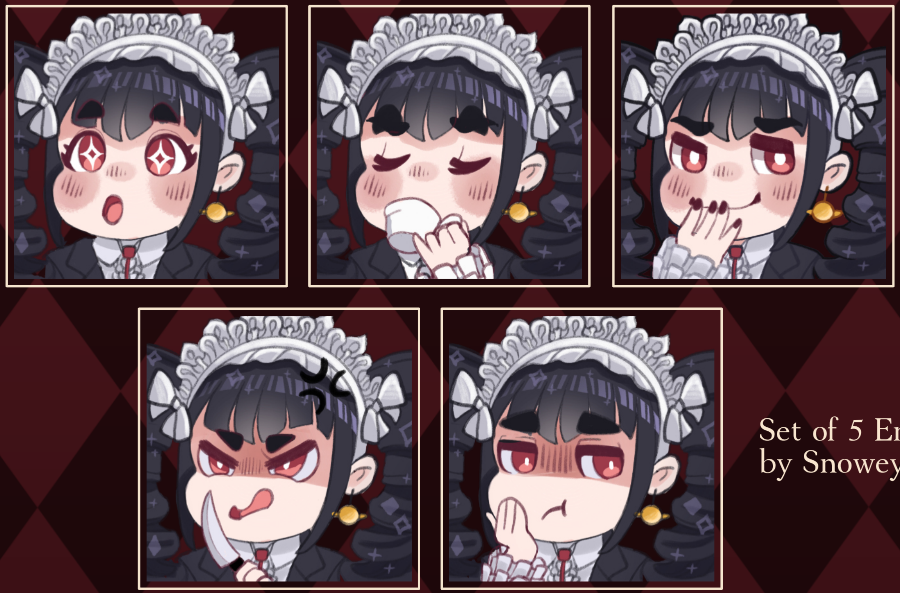
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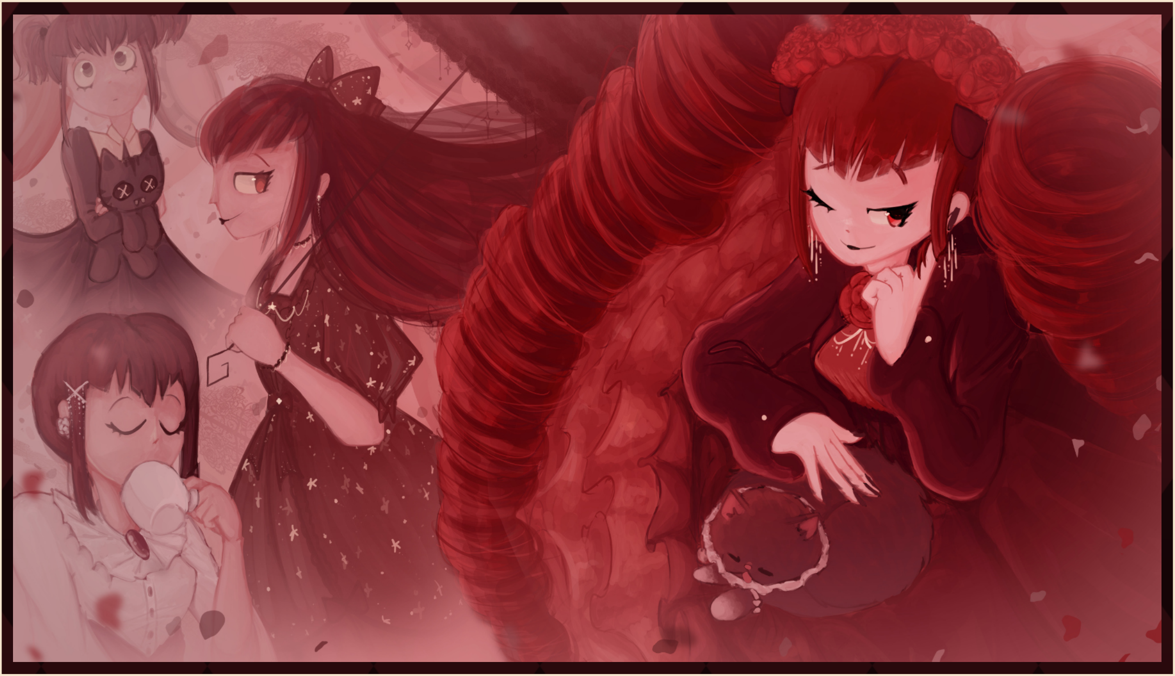
Desktop Wallpaper by Mint

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Starry's Light
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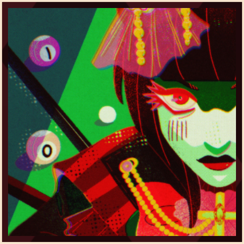

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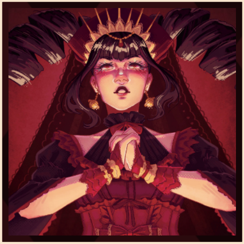

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Queen of Liars: Celestia was my first modding experience and would not have been possible without the support of the mods, contributors, and of course you, the consumer! Thank you for helping the zine reach this point, and for purchasing the zine to support all who worked on it. I have learned many things, and am eager to use my new knowledge to ensure the success of future projects!

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hej hej! i hope you enjoyed all of the celestia creations in the zine, brought to you by our phenomenal contributors who all worked so hard throughout creation period. i'm glad i got to be a part of such an amazing project and helping see it to the end. this zine was my very first dive into formatting, and i couldn't be more thankful for this opportunity; i hope i did a good job! anyways, thank you so much for choosing to support the zine and the team behind it.

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I've never been good at writing these sorts of messages, but I'd still like to give proper thanks to everyone! Thank you to all the wonderful contributors who brought so much justice to the best girl ever, they all did an incredible job with Celestia and deserve so much praise for all the time they've spent drawing and writing <3 Thank you to all the mods as well who have worked hard behind the scenes and worked with the contributors, thank you to everyone who supported and purchased the zine, and thank you to Vin for organizing all of this and bringing this all together! I'm very humbled I was accepted as a moderator and was able to assist with the merch and work with some very skilled creators. I hope all of the contributors had a fun time making all of their pieces, and that everyone who bought the zine enjoy all of the content ^^

Aisu

Merch

aisudoki

To our contributors– your enthusiasm was energising! Each checkin brought new surprises and it was so satisfying to see your progress throughout! Thank you for making modding such a nice experience. To the dear reader, thanks for celebrating Celeste with us! It's great to see so much love for an og DR character

Omori

Writing

Hello there, all of you swaggy people! I truly enjoyed participating in and helping with this zine, especially 'cause I was given the opportunity to work with an amazing mod team and other talented contributors. But of course, I should also thank you, fellow consumer! Thank you for purchasing this neat zine. May the elegant Celeste content make you smile, and may you have a wonderful day/night!